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Abstract

This is the report for the terminal evaluation of the project, Securing Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use in Huangshan Municipality, funded in the People's Republic of China by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and executed by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). The operational partner was the Huangshan Administrative Committee (HSAC). The primary audience and users of this evaluation are: project governance and implementation bodies; national government counterparts; FAO divisions and regional offices; the GEF; and other donors, organizations and institutions.

The terminal evaluation was based on 39 evaluation questions and used four main sources of data: (i) desk reviews of all relevant documents and information; (ii) semi-structured interviews with project stakeholders; (iii) focus group discussions (FGDs) in a group setting; and (iv) field visits. Data were analysed to address the evaluation questions, and ratings were assigned in accordance with the GEF evaluation requirements.

The relevance of the project was Satisfactory, aligning strongly with FAO and GEF priorities, and with the national priorities of the People's Republic of China for an ecological civilization and protected area reform. There were some shortcomings in project design that had adverse impacts on implementation.

Overall, the project rating is Satisfactory. Progress towards the objective is Satisfactory. Most outcomes and outputs were achieved. The main shortcoming involved limited progress with good practices and lessons learned being taken up and replicated elsewhere in non-participating nature reserves.

The efficiency of the project is Moderately Satisfactory. This improved significantly after a slow start. Sustainability of the project's results is Moderately Likely. HSAC effectively discharged its project management role and responsibilities, and FAO effectively delivered oversight, supervision and backstopping during the second half. This, however, was weaker during the first half.

The project design contained no actions or reporting that addressed gender issues. Implementation and reporting only had limited consideration of gender participation.

The project used an indirect execution modality in accordance with an execution agreement that had been developed prior to FAO's Operational Partners Implementation Modality (OPIM). There were some benefits to this indirect execution, despite related delays and implementation challenges.

The report provides six conclusions, nine recommendations and seven lessons learned. The recommendations include finalizing the sustainability plan; continuing to support non-participating reserves in order to improve management effectiveness; assessing the effectiveness of a related innovative protected area management model; and considering opportunities to promote the project's achievements, good practices and innovations internationally.

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The project management office (PMO) was very helpful and patient in responding to our many requests for more information. It also assisted with the logistics of the stakeholder interviews and mission.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

BAC	Biodiversity Advisory Committee
CCC	community conservation committee
CTA	Chief Technical Adviser
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FGD	focus group discussion
GEF	Global Environment Facility
HSAC	Huangshan Administrative Committee
METT	Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool
NGO	non-governmental organization
OED	Office of Evaluation
OPIM	Operational Partners Implementation Modality
PMO	project management office
PPR	project progress report
PSC	Project Steering Committee
TOC	theory of change
TOR	terms of reference
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group

Executive summary

Introduction

1. This is the terminal evaluation of the Securing Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use in Huangshan Municipality project. This evaluation is a requirement of FAO and GEF for project monitoring and reporting purposes. It was conducted for both accountability and learning purposes of FAO, the GEF, the national executing partner and other participating institutions.

2. The primary audience and users of this evaluation are: (i) project governance and implementation bodies; (ii) national government counterparts; (iii) FAO China; (iv) FAO headquarters, its technical division, the FAO-GEF Coordination Unit and FAO regional offices; (v) the GEF; and (vi) other donors, organizations and institutions interested in supporting or implementing similar projects.

3. The evaluation covers the entire project implementation period, from 17 September 2014 to October 2022, with an emphasis on results that took place after the mid-term evaluation. During the terminal evaluation phase, the project was extended until 31 May 2023. This assessment covers all nature reserves in which the project has been implemented.

4. The objectives of the evaluation are to: examine the achievements of the outcomes to date and the likelihood of future impacts; assess performance, gender-disaggregated achievements, and the implementation of planned project activities and planned outputs; understand the critical enablers and barriers for progress; identify project successes to promote replicability; and synthesize lessons learned. A list of 39 evaluation questions were provided at commencement, around which the evaluation was designed and conducted.

5. The evaluation was undertaken by a team of two: an international consultant and a national consultant. A mixed methods approach was used, involving multiple sources of data to inform the evaluation. The following four main data collection methods were used: (i) desk reviews of all relevant documents and information; (ii) semi-structured interviews with project stakeholders; (iii) FGDs with some stakeholders to draw out experiences in a group setting; and (iv) field visits. The semi-structured interviews, the FGDs and the site visits were conducted between 13 July and 5 August 2022, including a field mission by the national consultant between 15 and 21 July. The international consultant could not visit the People's Republic of China due to COVID-19 restrictions. Data analysis was conducted to address the evaluation questions, and ratings were assigned to some performance dimensions in accordance with the GEF evaluation requirements.

Main findings

6. The main findings are presented below. They are arranged under the GEF evaluation criteria.

Relevance

Finding 1. The project was highly relevant to the national priorities of the People's Republic of China and became more relevant over the period of implementation.

Finding 2. The project was congruent with GEF-5 programme strategies at the time of design.

Finding 3. The project was generally congruent with the FAO Country Programming Framework.

Finding 4. The project's objectives were generally in line with local communities' needs, despite limited specific activities or funding for this in the design.

Finding 5. There were shortcomings in the project design for delivering the expected outcomes.

Effectiveness

Finding 6. The project made a significant contribution to the creation of an integrated approach to the conservation and management of forest biodiversity in Huangshan Municipality.

Finding 7. The project made an excellent contribution to greater management efficiency in the 12 nature reserves and improved the status of these protected areas.

Finding 8. The project made a good contribution to strengthened institutional capacity and public and political support for the conservation of biodiversity in the forest ecosystems of the People's Republic of China.

Finding 9. There was satisfactory documentation of good practices. However, there is no evidence that good practices and lessons learned from the project are being taken up and replicated elsewhere in the non-participating nature reserves, especially in Tier 4 nature reserves.

Finding 10. There are barriers to further progress towards achievement of the project's outcomes and objectives, particularly the lack of uptake by Tier 3 and 4 nature reserves, and the lack of a sustainability and scaling up plan for the sustainable livelihood components.

Finding 11. Working with communities on alternative livelihoods was limited in an extent, partly because it was a weakness in the project design. The Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui were non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that led this work in communities around the Jiulongfeng Provincial Natural Reserve with contributions from the GEF.

Finding 12. All indicator species that were monitored showed stable or increasing population measures, even though some plant monitoring was incomplete.

Finding 13. The project has improved on documenting and communicating key messages since the mid-term evaluation.

Finding 14. The project has made solid contributions towards long-term impact, as identified in the reconstructed theory of change (TOC). This involves: investments in mainstreaming biodiversity into planning and policies; building capacity; preparing nature reserve management plans, disseminating good practices; building the nature reserve network and website; and strong partnerships.

Finding 15. The project achieved additionality through some interventions, especially the support for nature reserves to effectively plan for management and biodiversity conservation, and the establishment of community conservation committees (CCCs).

Efficiency

Finding 16. Because the first execution agreement for this project was developed in 2014, prior to the issuance of clear corporate guidance on indirect execution through OPIM, this project with "pre-OPIM modality" experienced a range of delays and implementation challenges.

Finding 17. After a very slow start, due largely to delays in negotiating the execution agreement, implementation efficiency has improved significantly since 2018 and has been especially high since the mid-term evaluation.

Finding 18. The pre-OPIM indirect execution modality had some clear benefits for the operational partner, but it created significant challenges when rolled out early in the project. This continued to create significant human resource demands that created some inefficiencies.

Finding 19. Given excellent cofinancing, the active participation of the executing partner and the delivery of additional related results by NGO partners, the project was cost-effective.

Finding 20. The project has shown some building of synergies and complementarities with other projects and avoided duplication.

Sustainability

Finding 21. The project's results are moderately likely to be sustainable, given the effective investments in mainstreaming biodiversity into planning and policies; building capacity; preparing nature reserve management plans; documenting and disseminating good practices; building the nature reserve network and website; and the strong partnerships established. Risks to sustainability arise from the lack of uptake by non-participating nature reserves of good practices and lessons learned (as described in Finding 9), and the lack of a strategy for sustaining and scaling up the work with communities on alternative livelihoods.

Finding 22. The project established institutional arrangements and cross-sector partnerships that are likely to be sustainable.

Finding 23. There has been limited effective replication and scaling up of results and experiences, although mechanisms have been developed that should assist replication and scaling up (such as good practices documentation and dissemination, the nature reserve network, and strong partnerships, including with NGOs).

Finding 24. The pre-OPIM indirect execution modality contributed to the municipal ownership of results and strengthened municipal capacity, which are expected to assist with the sustainability of results.

Finding 25. The project decreased sustainability risks by ensuring technical guidance and oversight across all results, as recommended by the mid-term evaluation. However, little progress was made with regard to the needs of Tier 3 and 4 nature reserves.

Factors affecting performance

Finding 26. The project design had shortcomings that led to implementation challenges.

Finding 27. The M&E plan at the point of project endorsement was generally practical and sufficient, but the project's results matrix was large and confusing. There were no gender-disaggregated targets or other reporting requirements.

Finding 28. M&E was implemented in accordance with the M&E plan.

Finding 29. HSAC effectively discharged its role and responsibilities related to the management and administration of the project.

Finding 30. FAO effectively delivered oversight, supervision and backstopping during the second half of the project, although the effectiveness of this and the relationships with the executing partner were low during the first half.

Finding 31. Capacity and human resources were not adequate for the negotiation of agreements and implementation under the pre-OPIM indirect execution modality. This does not necessarily mean that financial resources were inadequate. Development of capacity among staff is required.

Finding 32. The most significant challenges faced by the project related to establishing processes and building implementation and oversight capacity during the first half. Restrictions caused by COVID-19 also hindered the project.

Finding 33. Actual cofinancing exceeded the sum committed and made a real contribution to the project, including additional leveraged cofinancing from the Paradise Foundation.

Finding 34. Although a stakeholder engagement strategy had not been developed, most stakeholders were positively engaged and had a good understanding and ownership of the project. The project engaged local actors well, especially NGOs, even though the participating communities mostly had contact with the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui.

Finding 35. There was a high level of understanding of the project's aims, results and components, especially among staff of the nature reserves participating in the project. This shows that communication of these has been effective, despite a lower understanding of the project details among village beneficiaries. Most lessons and knowledge sharing has been effective, but there is no evidence of the successful adoption of good practices by Tier 4 nature reserves.

Finding 36. The project's communications and knowledge products have the potential to support sustainability and scaling up. The sustainability plan that is being developed should include this consideration.

Cross-cutting dimensions

Finding 37. The project design contained no actions or reporting that addressed gender issues, and implementation and reporting only had limited consideration of gender participation. A gender mainstreaming plan was not developed until the mid-term evaluation was completed in 2021, which was too late to significantly influence implementation.

Finding 38. Although the project design did not take into consideration minority groups, engagement with the community, delivered largely through NGOs, adopted a human rights-based approach by respecting the rights and customs of the local people. Extensive activities were also undertaken with school students.

Finding 39. Project design and implementation did not address any environmental or social safeguards.

7. The following additional information is provided:

   i. Stakeholder engagement – A stakeholder strategy was not developed during project design or implementation. Nevertheless, most stakeholders were positively engaged. The nature reserve staff had a very good understanding and ownership of the purpose and components of the project. The villagers were very positive about the benefits from the project and generally understood that the aim of supporting alternative livelihoods was to relieve pressure on the natural resources and species, although the profile of FAO and the GEF was low relative to partner NGOs. Local actors were engaged during design and implementation.

   ii. Gender – This GEF-5 project did not undertake a gender analysis, as this was not required at the time, and did not include any gender-specific specific actions, targets or monitoring. Project implementation gave some consideration to gender participation in activities and gender-disaggregated reporting, albeit limited. In response to a recommendation from the mid-term evaluation, a gender mainstreaming plan was developed. However, this was not finished until 2021 and had limited time to influence project implementation.

iii. Knowledge management – Despite a slow start to the knowledge management and good practices components of the project, the project met its targets by project closure. It published good practices, built a high-quality website linked to the HSAC site and established a computer-based nature reserve network. A shortcoming was that the Evaluation Team saw little evidence that the knowledge management and transfer of good practices had been effective at changing management in Tier 4 reserves. The knowledge products described above will continue beyond project closure and contribute to sustainability. This includes a three-year maintenance contract for the project website.

8. The following ratings are provided:

i. progress towards achieving the project development objective(s): SATISFACTORY

ii. overall progress on implementation: SATISFACTORY

iii. overall risk rating: MODERATE

Conclusions

9. The conclusions are provided as follows:

Conclusion 1. The project was highly relevant to national conservation priorities and relevant to FAO and the GEF strategic priorities. It was also relevant to community beneficiary needs, although this aspect of the project design and funding was relatively weak.

Conclusion 2. The project achieved most of its outcomes and targets, which is highly commendable because it experienced major delays early on and was significantly behind schedule at the time of the mid-term evaluation.

Conclusion 3. The project duration was extended from five years to eight years. This was due to a two-year delay in initial funds, poor relationships and low levels of trust during the first four years, and COVID-19 challenges. Project efficiency has been turned around by various factors, especially improved FAO oversight and capacity since 2018 and the implementation of strong recommendations since the mid-term evaluation in 2019.

Conclusion 4. Most of the project's interventions were well targeted on measures that will continue beyond the life of the project, and ownership is strong. Therefore, many results are likely to continue after project completion. There are risks to sustainability from the lack of progress with the 60 Tier 4 nature reserves and the lack of a strategy for sustaining and scaling up the work with communities on alternative livelihoods.

Conclusion 5. The materialized cofinancing exceeded the committed cofinancing. The contribution of Huangshan Municipality to the project's achievements was very significant, and the partnership with NGOs was innovative and added great value.

Conclusion 6. The project design and implementation had limited consideration of gender and other cross-cutting issues.

Recommendations

10. The recommendations are provided as follows:

Recommendation 1. The sustainability plan that has been started should be finalized. It should include careful attention to good practices dissemination; supporting Tier 3 and 4 nature reserves to improve management; sustaining and scaling up community co-management and alternative

livelihood activities; and learning from the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui management model in the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve.

Recommendation 2. For Tier 3 nature reserves, continue providing support to improve their management effectiveness, using the learnings and good practices from this project.

Recommendation 3. For Tier 4 nature reserves, promote the adaptation of the community co-management approach and the Forest Chief Policy to develop a new model that empowers the community to manage the nature reserves and their natural resources.

Recommendation 4. Assess the effectiveness of the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui entrusted management model in the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve and, if appropriate, explore opportunities to scale up and apply to other communities, forest areas and nature reserves with suitable conditions.

Recommendation 5. In future projects using an indirect execution modality, provide enhanced capacity building in the development of agreements and the implementation of required reporting and financial procedures.

Recommendation 6. Assess the future needs in Huangshan Municipality for expert advice on biodiversity-related matters after project closure. Consider rationalizing the Project Leading Group, the Biodiversity Conservation Committee, and the Biodiversity Advisory Committee (BAC).

Recommendation 7. In future FAO-GEF projects, if a project has a strong policy focus, then the operational partner should be a provincial bureau (such as a provincial grassland and forestry bureau).

Recommendation 8. Consider opportunities to promote the achievements, good practices and innovations of this project at the United Nations Biodiversity Conference (CBD COP 15) in Montreal, Canada in December 2022.

Recommendation 9. Explore opportunities to disseminate the achievements, good practices and innovations of this project internationally, including the preparation of materials in languages other than Chinese, if necessary.

Executive Summary Table 1. GEF evaluation criteria rating table

GEF criteria/subcriteria	Rating[1]	Summary comments
A. STRATEGIC RELEVANCE		
A1. Overall strategic relevance	S	
A1.1. Alignment with FAO and the GEF strategic priorities	S	The project aligned with FAO and the GEF strategic priorities at the time of design and at completion.
A1.2. Relevance to national, regional and global priorities, and beneficiary needs	S	The project was highly relevant to national, regional and global priorities, despite shortcomings in the design for meeting beneficiary needs.
A1.3. Complementarity with existing interventions	S	The project design was based on learnings from other GEF projects, particularly the component on Improving Management of Nature Reserves in Guangxi.
B. EFFECTIVENESS		
B1. Overall assessment of project results	S	
B1.1. Delivery of project outputs	S	The project delivered most outputs and met most associated indicators.

[1] See rating scheme in Appendix 3.

GEF criteria/subcriteria	Rating[1]	Summary comments
B1.2. Progress towards project objective	MS	The project made good general progress towards the objective, but there was limited progress towards good practices being adopted by Tier 4 nature reserves.
- Outcome 1	S	The project made a significant contribution to the creation of an integrated approach to the conservation and management of forest biodiversity in Huangshan Municipality.
- Outcome 2	S	The project made an excellent contribution to greater management efficiency in the 12 nature reserves and improved the status of these protected areas.
- Outcome 3	S	The project made a good contribution to increased institutional capacity and public and political support for the conservation of biodiversity in the forest ecosystems of the People's Republic of China.
- Outcome 4	MS	There was satisfactory documentation of good practices. However, there is little evidence that good practices and lessons learned from the project are being taken up and replicated elsewhere in the non-participating natures reserves, especially Tier 4 nature reserves.
- Overall rating of progress towards achieving objectives/outcomes	S	
B1.3. Likelihood of impact	S	The project's investments in mainstreaming biodiversity into planning and policies; building capacity; preparing nature reserve management plans; disseminating good practices; building the nature reserve network and website; and establishing strong partnerships mean that impacts are likely.
C. EFFICIENCY		
C1. Efficiency	MS	After a very slow start, implementation efficiency has improved significantly since 2018 and has been especially high since the mid-term evaluation. The project was cost-effective.
D. SUSTAINABILITY OF PROJECT OUTCOMES		
D1. Overall likelihood of risks to sustainability	ML	The project's interventions have been well targeted to build institutional and individual capacity and capability (including within villages), mainstream biodiversity, and facilitate information sharing. There are risks to sustainability and scaling up for the improved management of Tier 4 nature reserves and alternative livelihood activities.
D1.1. Financial risks	ML	There is regular municipal funding, but it is not sufficient for all nature reserves in the municipality. Opportunities could be considered to extend the entrusted management model with the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui.
D1.2. Sociopolitical risks	L	The project is very consistent with national priorities and therefore has strong support at all levels of government. The project's alternative livelihood activities are supported by the communities surrounding nature reserves. There is some risk if communities feel the support will not continue.

GEF criteria/subcriteria	Rating[1]	Summary comments
D1.3. Institutional and governance risks	L	The project improved institutional arrangements, including the establishment of permanent biodiversity committees and greater institutional and individual capacity. There are no significant institutional and governance risks.
D1.4. Environmental risks	L	There are no significant environmental risks to the sustainability of project results. The measures put in place should assist managers in addressing climate change impacts.
D2. Catalysis and replication	MS	Some relevant measures are in place. However, catalysis and replication for Tier 3 and 4 sites and the alternative livelihoods work are not strong and should be addressed in the project sustainability plan.
E. FACTORS AFFECTING PERFORMANCE		
E1. Project design and readiness	MU	The project was developed in consideration of national priorities and local needs, and included important initiatives. However, there were flaws in the causal logic.
E2. **Quality of project implementation**	MS	
E2.1. Quality of project implementation by FAO (budget holder, lead technical officer, Project Task Force, etc.)	MS	FAO implementation had been weak until 2018. Relationships with HSAC and the PMO were also weak. However, implementation has been strong since then.
E2.1. Project oversight (Project Steering Committee [PSC], project working group, etc.)	MS	Project oversight had been weak until 2018 but has been strong since then.
E3. **Quality of project execution** by HSAC, the executing agency	S	HSAC effectively discharged its role and responsibilities related to the management and administration of the project.
E4. Financial management and cofinancing	HS	Materialized cofinancing exceeded committed financing at CEO endorsement and was a real component of the project.
E5. Project partnerships and stakeholder engagement	MS	Strong partnerships developed, especially with local stakeholders. Stakeholders' understanding of the project's aims was generally high, with the exception of local communities.
E6. Communications, knowledge management and knowledge products	S	Targets for communications and knowledge products met. Communications has been generally effective.
E7. **Overall quality of M&E**	MS	
E7.1. M&E design	MS	The M&E plan in the project document was practical and sufficient, although the results matrix was large and confusing. There were no gender-disaggregated targets or other reporting requirements.
E7.2. M&E implementation plan (including financial and human resources)	S	The project closely followed the M&E plan, with minor shortcomings in clear reporting against indicators and targets in the results matrix.
E8. Overall assessment of factors affecting performance	S	
F. CROSS-CUTTING CONCERNS		
F1. Gender and other equity dimensions	MU	The design included no gender-specific actions or reporting. Consideration of gender was limited during implementation. A gender mainstreaming

GEF criteria/subcriteria	Rating[1]	Summary comments
		plan developed, but it was too late for it to influence implementation.
F2. Human rights issues/indigenous peoples	MS	The project design did not consider minority groups, and there are no ethnic minorities in the project area. Engagement with the community adopted a human rights-based approach.
F3. Environmental and social safeguards	MS	There were no relevant actions or safeguards in the project because it was assessed during design as being unlikely to have adverse environmental or social impacts.
Overall project rating	**S**	

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the evaluation

1. This terminal evaluation is a requirement of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF) for project monitoring and reporting purposes. It was conducted for both accountability and learning purposes of FAO, the GEF, the national executing partner, and other participating institutions. The main portion of the terminal evaluation was conducted during the few months before the end of the project (17 March 2023).

1.2 Intended users

2. In accordance with the terms of reference (TOR) for this terminal evaluation, the primary audience and users of the evaluation are: (i) project governance and implementation bodies, that is, the project management office (PMO), the Project Steering Committee (PSC), the Project Leading Group, FAO China and the FAO-GEF Coordination Unit, which will use the findings and lessons identified to finalize project activities, plan for the sustainability of results achieved, and improve the formulation and implementation of similar projects; (ii) national government counterparts, such as the Huangshan Administrative Committee (HSAC), which will use the evaluation findings and conclusions for future planning; (iii) FAO headquarters and the FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, which will use the findings and lessons learned to improve the project's activities, plan for sustainability of the results achieved and improve the formulation and implementation of similar projects; (iv) the GEF, which will use the findings to inform future strategic investment decisions; and (v) other donors, organizations and institutions interested in supporting or implementing similar projects.

3. These users were included in the stakeholder analysis and interviewee selection that was undertaken as part of the inception report, which was prepared during the planning phase of the terminal evaluation in June 2022.

1.3 Scope and objectives of the evaluation

4. This terminal evaluation assesses the Securing Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use in Huangshan Municipality project. In accordance with the TOR, the terminal evaluation covered the entire project implementation period (from 17 September 2014 to 17 September 2022), while focusing on the results that took place after the mid-term evaluation. This terminal evaluation considers the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the mid-term evaluation and validates them where necessary. The terminal evaluation covers all nature reserves in which the project has been implemented.

5. In accordance with the TOR, the objectives of this terminal evaluation are to:

    i. Examine the extent and magnitude of the project in achieving its stated objective and outcomes to date and determine the likelihood of future impacts, especially on 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.

iii. Understand the critical enablers for progress and the barriers to progress for the project components and activities.

iv. Identify project successes to promote replicability.

v. Synthesize lessons learned that may help in the design and implementation of future FAO and FAO-GEF forestry management or biodiversity conservation-related initiatives.

6. A list of evaluation questions was provided in the TOR, around which the evaluation was conducted and this report is structured. These are included in Table 1.

Table 1. Evaluation questions by GEF criteria (from the TOR)

1. Relevance
1.1 Were the project outcomes congruent with the GEF programme strategies (i.e. on Biodiversity), priorities of China and the FAO Country Programming Framework? Have the project's objectives been in line with the needs of the local communities located at the project sites?
1.2 Has there been any change in the Project's relevance since the MTE?
2. Effectiveness - achievement of project results
2.1 (Outcome 1) To what extent has the project contributed to the creation of an integrated approach to the conservation and management of forest biodiversity in Huangshan municipality?
2.2 (Outcome 2) To what extent has the project contributed to an increase in management efficiency in the 12 nature reserves and improved the status of these protected areas?
2.3 (Outcome 3) To what extent has the project contributed to an increased institutional capacity and public and political support for the conservation of biodiversity in China's forest ecosystems?
2.4 (Outcome 4) Are lessons learned from the project being taken up and replicated elsewhere in the non-participating nature reserves?
2.5 Are there any barriers or other risks that may prevent future progress towards and the achievement of the project's outcomes and objectives
2.6 Has the project improved on documenting and communicating key messages, especially about the interlinkages the project needs to demonstrate and showcase? *(See mid-term evaluation Recommendation 2)*
3. Efficiency
3.1 How did the project activities, the institutional arrangements (FAO execution), the partnerships in place and the resources available contribute to, or impede, the achievement of the Project's results and objectives?
3.2 To what extent has project's implementation mechanism contributed to efficient implementation of main outputs (FAO as GEF implementing agency)?
3.3 Is the co-financing being made available to the project as planned to contribute to meeting project outputs, outcomes and objectives?
3.4 To what extent has the project built on synergies and complementarities with other projects, partnerships, etc. and avoided duplication of similar activities by other groups and initiatives?

3.5 Has the Operational Partners Agreement been applied efficiently?

3.6 Has the project been implemented efficiently, cost-effectively, and management been able to adapt to any changing conditions (COVID-19) to improve the efficiency of project implementation? How well have risks been identified and managed?

3.7 Has the project PMO hired a Chief Technical Adviser (CTA) familiar with GEF goals and strategies as a precondition to improved implementation and a lesson learned? *(See mid-term evaluation Recommendation 2)*

4. Sustainability

4.1 What is the likelihood of the project's sustainability?

4.2 Has the project established sustainable institutional arrangements or cross-sector partnerships?

4.3 What project results, lessons or experiences have been replicated (in different geographic areas) or scaled up (in the same geographic area, but on a much larger scale and funded by other sources)? What results, lessons or experiences are likely to be replicated or scaled up in the near future?

4.4 Did the Operational Partners Implementation Modality (OPIM) contribute to ensure major ownership and sustainability of the project results? Did the OPIM contribute to increase national, regional and sub-regional ownership to support better sustainability of results? And to strengthen capacities of regional, sub-regional and/or national entities?

4.5 Has the project decreased sustainability risks by ensuring technical implementation guidance and oversight for results across all outputs? *(See mid-term evaluation Recommendation 3)*

5. Factors affecting performance:

5.1 Is the project design suited to delivering the expected outcomes?

5.2 Is the project's causal logic (objectives and expected outcomes) coherent and clear, practical and feasible within the timeframe allowed?

5.3 How do the various stakeholder groups see their own engagement with the project and what are the strengths and challenges of the project's partnerships?

5.4 To what extent did the HSAC effectively discharge its role and responsibilities related to the management and administration of the project? What have been the main challenges in relation to the management and administration of the project?

5.5 Were local actors – civil society or private sector – involved in project design or implementation and what was the effect on project results?

5.6 Did the Project include a stakeholder engagement strategy? How effectively and continuously has it been able to engage the relevant Project stakeholders?

5.7 Does the terminal evaluation has any recommendations to increase engagement with any of these stakeholders?

5.8 Are there sufficient human resources, financial resources, etc. for the OPIM implementation and execution?

5.9 What have been the main challenges in terms of project management and administration? How well have risks been identified and managed?

5.10 What have been the financial management challenges of the project? To what extent has pledged co-financing been delivered? Has any additional leveraged co-financing been provided since implementation?

5.11 To what extent has FAO delivered oversight and supervision and backstopping (technical, administrative and operational) during project identification, formulation, approval, start-up and execution? What kind of support or changes is expected from FAO by the execution partners? How effective has the project's internal

M&E system been in supporting project planning and the development of a communication strategy to inform and promoting its key messages and results to partners, stakeholders and a general audience?
6. Environmental and social safeguards 6.1 To what extent were environmental and social concerns taken into consideration in the design of the project, and were these reflected on and adapted as necessary during implementation?
7. Gender 7.1 To what extent were gender considerations taken into account in designing, implementing, monitoring and reporting of the project? Was the project implemented in a manner that ensures gender equitable participation and benefits?
8. Co-financing 8.1 Which factors either enabled or hindered materialization of the planned co-financing? What conclusions for future FAO-GEF projects can be gained from these insights?
9. Progress to impact 9.1 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 there is a) an integrated approach to the conservation and management of forest biodiversity supported by a coherent policy, planning and institutional framework in Huangshan Municipality; b) an increase in average management efficiency in 12 project supported nature reserves included in the municipal network of protected areas; c) an increased institutional capacity and public and political support for the conservation of biodiversity in China's forest ecosystems; and d) an evidence that "lessons learned" from the project are being taken up and replicated elsewhere in the non-participating nature reserves? 9.2 To what changes in the policy/legal/regulatory framework has this project actively contributed to (working together with its national partners)?
10. Knowledge management 10.1 How effective has the communication of project aims, progress, results and key messages been, along with any structured lesson, knowledge product and experience-sharing between project partners and interested groups? 10.2 To what extent are communication and knowledge products and activities likely to support the sustainability and scaling up of project results?
11. Additionality 11.1 What can be concluded on the added value of project interventions compared to comparable alternatives?

Source: Elaborated by the Evaluation Team.

1.4 Methodology

1.4.1 General

7. This terminal evaluation adhered to the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) Norms and Standards for Evaluation (UNEG, 2016). It follows both the FAO Office of Evaluation (OED) project evaluation manual (FAO, 2019a) and the GEF guidelines for GEF agencies in conducting terminal evaluations for full-sized projects (GEF, 2017), as well as the associated methodological guidelines and practices. For assessing the implementation modality of the project, reference was made to the FAO internal document Preliminary Set of Questions for

Projects where Selected Project Results' Implementation was Delegated to Operational Partners.

8. The evaluation was undertaken by a two-person Evaluation Team comprising of an international consultant and a team leader (Adrian Stokes), and a national consultant (Fan Longqing).

9. During the design and preparation phase of the evaluation, an inception report was prepared in accordance with the guidance in Annex 10 of the OED project evaluation manual (FAO, 2019a). This included:

   i. a stakeholder analysis, including who would be involved, why and how their involvement contributes to the credibility of the evaluation and the results;

   ii. an evaluation methodology, giving detailed information on the approaches to be used and the methods selected for data collection; and

   iii. an evaluation matrix, which set out how the methodology would be operationalized by the Evaluation Team, presenting the specific evaluation questions and indicators under each evaluation question (see Box 1). This identified the sources for data collection.

1.4.2 Data collection methods

10. The methodology involved multiple sources of data to inform the evaluation. This ensured the collection of evidence-based information that is credible, reliable and useful. A mixed methods approach was used, adopting a combination of qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods and instruments.

11. The four main data collection methods were:

   i. Desk reviews: the evaluation was underpinned by a desk review of all relevant documents and information covering project design, implementation progress, and monitoring and review. This included quantitative components (assessing project reports and analysing and summarizing other data sources, such as consultant reports) and qualitative components (note taking to summarize and analyse). A key part of the desk review was the analysis of the project M&E, from design to implementation and project closure.

   ii. Semi-structured interviews with project stakeholders were held. The international consultant attended these via videoconferencing, and the national consultant attended these in person – if feasible and appropriate from a COVID-19 perspective.

   iii. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were held for some stakeholders to draw out experiences in a group setting. These were appropriate for beneficiaries at project sites and were planned carefully to be sensitive to specific settings and circumstances.

   iv. Field visits were undertaken by the national consultant to obtain a first-hand understanding of project activities and achievements, and to connect with beneficiaries. The semi-structured interviews and the FGDs with beneficiaries and other stakeholders were conducted during the field visits.

12. During the design and preparation phase, tools were developed for the semi-structured interviews and the FGDs, and tailored to different stakeholder groups to ensure the

standardized collection of data that addressed the evaluation questions. A sample semi-structured interview tool and an FGD tool are provided in Appendices 6 and 7.

13. As part of the stakeholder analysis in the inception report, key informants were identified in the following categories:

i. active stakeholders with decision-making authority, including stakeholders from FAO, the PSC and the PMO;

ii. active stakeholders with direct responsibility, including stakeholders from the PMO, pilot nature reserves, FAO and other partner groups;

iii. project beneficiaries, including beneficiary villages; and

iv. secondary stakeholders, including Biodiversity Advisory Committee (BAC) members, FAO staff, third party and consulting institutions, and individual consultants.

1.4.3 Data collection

14. The semi-structured interviews, the FGDs and the site visits were conducted between 13 July and 5 August 2022, including a field mission by the national consultant between 15 and 21 July. The mission was undertaken in accordance with all requirements and protocols relating to COVID-19. The international consultant was not in the People's Republic of China for the interviews or the mission.

15. In total, 38 stakeholders participated in the semi-structured interviews and the FGDs and contributed to the collection of evidence addressing the evaluation questions. This involved 12 project beneficiaries who participated in the FGDs and 26 other stakeholders who participated in the semi-structured interviews. The list of people interviewed is provided in Appendix 1.

16. The desk review commenced during the design and preparation phase, and continued until the finalization of this draft report as additional documents, data and other evidence continued to be received.

17. In addition to considering restrictions due to COVID-19, the following criteria were used for site visit selection: 1) breadth and progress of project activities; 2) accessibility (time, geography and resources available); and 3) project performance (both well-performing and under-performing areas, as identified via preliminary assessment by the Evaluation Team). Finally, sites that had been visited during the mid-term evaluation in 2019 were a high priority. This maximized the capacity to assess the project's progress and provided some continuity in terms of interviewee involvement between the two evaluations.

18. Visits were made to the following key project sites, all of which were also visited during the mid-term evaluation:

i. Huangshan National Scenic Reserve. This is the Tier 1 reserve around which the project's objectives and activities were designed and implemented.

ii. Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve. This is a Tier 2 reserve located west of the Huangshan National Scenic Reserve. It has been the focus of extensive project activities and operates under an entrusted reserve management model involving

the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui. It also reflects extensive local community involvement.

iii. Tianhushan Provincial Nature Reserve. This is a Tier 2 reserve located southeast of the Huangshan National Scenic Reserve. It received a lot of support from the GEF project, including assistance for the construction of a hiking trail that is used by patrolling guards. This reserve is separated from the extensive activities in and around the Huangshan National Scenic Reserve and the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve. However, it was readily accessible, and selecting it for a site visit was an efficient use of time and resources.

iv. Datong Village and Shangling Village. These sites are located south and north of Jiulongfeng, respectively. Most of the project's community engagement activities took place here, including community co-management, village-protected areas, alternative livelihoods and the construction of ecological corridors.

1.4.4 Data analysis

19. Data analysis was conducted after completing the interviews and addressing the evaluation questions, as detailed in the evaluation matrix. Ratings were assigned to some dimensions of project performance in accordance with the GEF evaluation requirements (see Appendix 3).

20. Where possible, evidence was triangulated by assessing the relevant evidence collected by at least two methods to verify findings and build a richer narrative of the results.

21. A debriefing session was held on 11 August 2022, where preliminary findings were presented and discussed with stakeholders from FAO, HSAC and the PMO.

1.5 Limitations

22. The primary limitation was that the international consultant was not present in the People's Republic of China due to COVID-19 restrictions. This meant that there was no first-hand opportunity to understand the project in the field, assess results and develop face-to-face relationships with stakeholders. To mitigate this limitation, the national consultant collected photos and videos, and debriefed with the international consultant after site visits and semi-structured interviews that the international consultant could not attend remotely. This ensured that evidence was collected to inform the analysis and enable triangulation. Nevertheless, this lack of first-hand engagement by the international consultant with the project and stakeholders remains a fundamental limitation.

23. Another limitation lies in the long duration of project implementation. Because eight years have elapsed since the project commenced, there has been considerable turnover of staff within HSAC, at participating nature reserves, in the PMO and at FAO. This means that historical knowledge of the project is sometimes limited. In particular, there are knowledge gaps relating to the project's design phase and early implementation years. To mitigate this, efforts were made to invite stakeholders who had previous involvement for interview. These stakeholders were very willing to participate and interviews were held with the previous national technical adviser, the CTA and the lead technical officer.

1.6 Structure of the report

24. Following this introduction, Section 2 presents the background and context of the project; Section 3 presents the main findings for each evaluation question; Section 4 provides conclusions and recommendations; and Section 5 lists lessons learned.

25. The report is accompanied by seven appendices: Appendix 1 – People interviewed; Appendix 2 – GEF evaluation criteria rating table; Appendix 3 – Rating scheme; Appendix 4 – GEF cofinancing table; Appendix 5 – Results matrix showing achievements; and Appendices 6 and 7 – examples of the tools used during interviews and discussions.

26. The report is also accompanied by the following annex: Annex 1. Terms of reference for the evaluation.

2. Background and context of the project

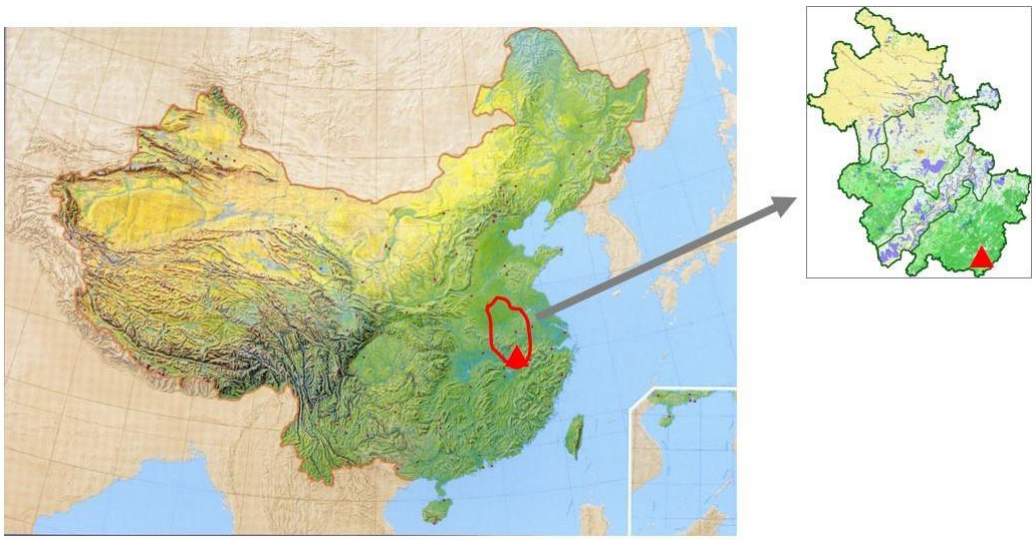
Box 1. Basic project information

- GEF project ID number: 4526
- Recipient country: the People's Republic of China
- Implementing agency: FAO/GEF
- Executing agency: HSAC
- Date of project start: 17 September 2014
- Initial date of expected end: 16 September 2019
- Revised date of expected end: 17 March 2023
- Date of mid-term evaluation: from February to May 2019

27. This project was sponsored by the GEF with a grant of USD 2 607 273. FAO was the project's implementing agency and HSAC was the executing partner. Within HSAC, the Bureau of Garden and Forests was the designated unit for project execution and the focal point for all formal exchanges and collaboration with international agencies.

28. The project area consists of Huangshan Municipality, located in eastern China's Anhui Province. It covers roughly 9 807 km^2 in area with a total population of 1.5 million.

Figure 1. Map of the People's Republic of China showing Anhui Province outlined in red; enlarged area shows Anhui Province, with the red triangle indicating Huangshan Municipality



Source: *Project document*. Map conforms to the UN.

29. In 2009, The Nature Conservancy designated Huangshan Municipality as one of 32 areas to be considered priorities for biodiversity conservation in the People's Republic of China (35, if three marine areas are counted). This analysis included an "irreplaceability" index, which demonstrated that the municipality had the highest value possible in eastern China and that these mountains represented the only biodiversity "hot spot" in this region of the country. Huangshan, situated in Huangshan Municipality, was designated as a National Scenic Reserve due to its world-renowned geological formations and visual landscapes. Many other nature reserves have been established in the municipality.

30. The project document identified that, despite the government and public commitment to and support for environmental protection in Huangshan Municipality, biodiversity conservation objectives are not being fully achieved through the existing nature reserve system. Many nature reserves faced significant challenges in working cooperatively with adjacent communities or communities located inside the reserves themselves. In addition, the project document identified that the reserves in the municipality faced a number of threats to biodiversity and effective protected area management, including potential adverse impacts from increasing numbers of visitors to the nature reserves and an absence of policies, plans and capacity to manage this new use of nature reserves.

31. The main constraint identified in the project document was the lack of human capacity in the conservation of biodiversity at all levels comprising the municipal nature reserve system. Even in the Huangshan National Scenic Reserve itself, which meets many international standards in planning and management as a scenic reserve, there was little capacity for managing biodiversity. The management effectiveness of other Huangshan nature reserves suffers from these constraints, along with other constraints such as the absence of community outreach programmes and poor to non-existent visitor facilities.

32. The situation was noted as being exacerbated further by a lack of coordination and collaboration between and among many of the relevant government agencies.

33. The project was developed between 2011 and 2013 to respond to these growing problems. The goal of the project is "to secure the effective conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in the mountainous forest ecosystems of Huangshan Municipality" (FAO-GEF, 2013, p. 1).

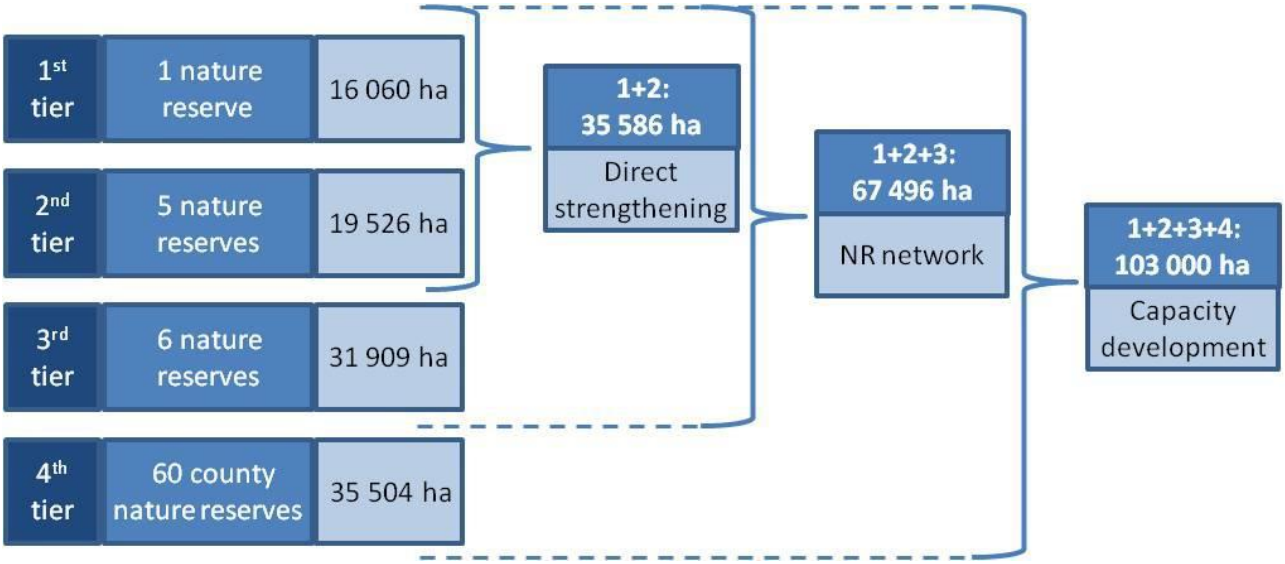
34. The project's specific objective is to "evaluate, adapt and implement relevant 'best practices' derived from the successful management of Huangshan National Scenic Reserve to strengthen and upgrade the existing municipal system of PAs [protected areas]." (FAO-GEF, 2013, p. 1).

35. To achieve the objectives, the project includes four components, each with several associated outcomes and outputs:

    i. Component 1: Policy, planning and institutional arrangements
    ii. Component 2: Improved nature reserve management effectiveness and networks
    iii. Component 3: Capacity building, environmental education and public awareness
    iv. Component 4: Information dissemination and project M&E

36. The project covers 73 reserves in Huangshan Municipality with a very wide range in size, ecological value and management capacity. To meet the project objective and effectively work with this large number of diverse reserves, the project was designed using a tiered approach with different interventions for reserves within four tiers (see Figure 2). Tier 1 contains the Huangshan National Scenic Reserve and Tier 2 contains five nature reserves. The reserves in these tiers were strengthened through the introduction of new concepts in planning and management, including promoting greater participation of local communities living in or adjacent to the reserve. Tier 3 comprised an additional six nature reserves, which participated in the creation of a reserve network and ecological health monitoring activities. Tier 4 included 61 county-level nature reserves that participated in project-supported capacity development and the sharing of good practices.

Figure 2. Overview of tiered system of activities



Source: FAO. 2014. *Project document*.

37. The project was funded by a GEF grant of USD 2 607 273 and committed cofinancing of USD 10 508 212 with a total budget of USD 13 115 485. The sources of funding are listed in Table 2, and the materialized cofinancing has been verified as part of this terminal evaluation.

Table 2. Overview of GEF funding and cofinancing commitments

Funding source	Amount (USD)
HSAC	5 473 612
Yixian County Bureau of Forestry	88 200
Huangshan Municipal Bureau of Finance	3 900 000
Huangshan Tourism Development Authority	372 000
Local village producers	436 500
FAO	237 900
Total cofinancing	**10 508 212**
Total GEF allocation	**2 607 273**
Total project budget	**13 115 485**

Source: FAO. 2022. *Project document*.

38. In addition to the partners listed in Table 2, other important partners included Green Anhui, an environmental non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Anhui Province, and many research institutions, consulting companies and expert individuals.

39. The target beneficiaries were: (i) nature reserve staff receiving support from the project; (ii) local and municipal government stakeholders; (iii) communities living in proximity to the project-supported nature reserves; and (iv) the broader public and visitors benefiting from conservation education and public awareness activities.

40. The project timeline was changed three times. After the mid-term evaluation, a two-year extension was granted until 17 September 2021 due to delays experienced in the first two years. Two successive extensions were later granted, initially until 17 September 2022 and then until 17 March 2023, due to challenges associated with finalizing the project and expending the budget in the face of COVID-19 challenges. The final six-month extension occurred in September 2022 after data collection for this terminal evaluation had been completed and the first draft report had been prepared, meaning that most of the evaluation occurred when the project had more than six months before completion. This is technically inconsistent with the OED project evaluation manual (FAO, 2019a) and the GEF guidelines, which recommend that terminal evaluations be conducted within six months of the actual completion date. The terminal evaluation report, however, was finalized in October, five months before the revised completion date. The Evaluation Team did not have an input on the decision regarding the extension that occurred during the terminal evaluation period.

41. There were no major changes to the design. However, minor changes were made after the mid-term evaluation. There were no changes to the budget.

2.1 Theory of change

42. There was no theory of change (TOC) developed for the project. A TOC was reconstructed as part of the mid-term evaluation. However, this was not a full reconstruction of the causal relationships from a situation analysis to the desired change or impact. Therefore, another TOC was reconstructed by the terminal Evaluation Team (Figure 3).

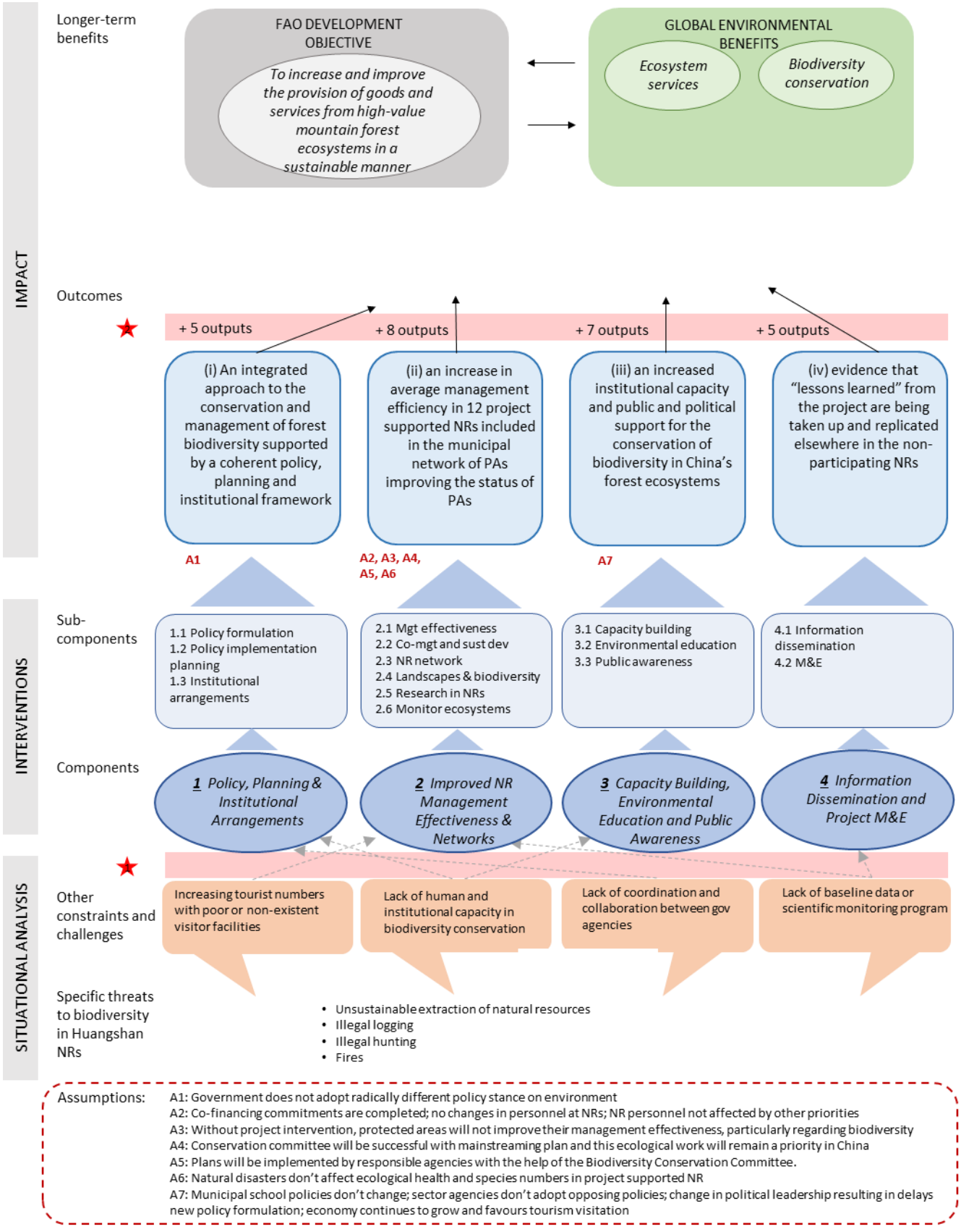
43. Some substantial shortcomings in the project's causal logic are apparent from the reconstructed TOC (Figure 3):

i. The situation analysis (threats, constraints and other challenges) described in the project document does not lead logically to interventions that address identified threats or barriers. The four "components" have a limited clear relationship to the defined problem.

ii. The project has four "outcomes" with several "outputs." The logical explanation for how the outputs will lead to the defined outcomes is limited.

iii. The aspects of the project addressing alternative livelihoods for communities are not well defined. Although human impacts are identified as specific threats to biodiversity, and Subcomponent 2.2 and Output 2.1.3 address community co-management and sustainable production activities, these are not specifically included in the "components" or "outcomes" of the project.

Figure 3. Reconstructed TOC for the project



Source: Elaborated by the Evaluation Team.

3. Findings

44. The information in parentheses after each finding indicates which evaluation question is addressed (see Table 1) and which outcome or output it relates to, if any.

3.1 Relevance

Finding 1. The project was highly relevant to the national priorities of the People's Republic of China and became more relevant over the period of implementation (Evaluation Questions 1.1, 1.2).

45. At the time of design, the project was consistent with several themes and results in the China Biodiversity Partnership and Framework for Action 2011–2017. This reflected the country's principal investment strategy for biodiversity conservation that had been developed to facilitate a dialogue with the GEF and other financing agencies.

46. Since then, there have been major changes to the national priorities of the People's Republic of China in this area, and the project is highly relevant in this changed policy environment. In 2016, the Chinese Government established an "ecological civilization" mission as a key element to modernizing the country by realizing a harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. A protected area reform, including the establishment of a national park network, is a key part of this. Government at all levels address biodiversity conservation and environmental protection under these national policies.

Finding 2. The project was congruent with GEF-5 programme strategies at the time of design (Evaluation Question 1.1).

47. The project-supported GEF-5 Biodiversity Objective 1: "Improve sustainability of protected area systems" and Biodiversity Objective 2: "Mainstream biodiversity conservation and sustainable use into production landscapes, seascapes and sectors." It contributed directly to Biodiversity Outcome 1.1: "Improved management effectiveness of existing and new protected areas" (GEF, 2011) It remains consistent with GEF biodiversity strategies under GEF-6 and GEF-7.

Finding 3. The project was generally congruent with the FAO Country Programming Framework (Evaluation Question 1.1).

48. The project was developed to be consistent with FAO's Strategic Framework, as reflected in the Organization's medium-term plan from 2014 to 2017 (FAO, 2013), particularly the outcomes under Strategic Objective 2: "Increase and improve provision of goods and services from agriculture, forestry and fisheries in a sustainable manner." However, the connections with sustainable livelihoods and agriculture were not such a strong feature of the project design and budget. Therefore, the realized contribution to Strategic Objective 2 was not large.

49. Similarly, the project was generally congruent with the current FAO Country Programming Framework in China, especially "Fostering sustainable and climate resilient agricultural development" (FAO, 2017a). However, the realized contributions to this were also not large. This is because the connections with sustainable livelihoods and agriculture were not a strong feature of the project design and budget.

Finding 4. The project's objectives were generally in line with local communities' needs, despite limited specific activities or funding for this in the design (Evaluation Question 1.1).

50. The project was developed with attention to the needs of local communities. Investigations and consultations were used to inform the development of the relevant interventions. However, the aspects of the project addressing alternative livelihoods for communities were not well defined in the project document, and the allocated budget was limited (see also Section 2.1).

Finding 5. There were shortcomings in the project design for delivering the expected outcomes.

51. Section 2.1 of the TOC describes some substantial shortcomings in the project's causal logic. These had implications in terms of project implementation, for example:

i. The project was complicated and overambitious, with many components and deliverables (as identified by the mid-term evaluation).

ii. The results matrix was large (containing 38 individual indicators) and confusing, with different levels of outcome indicators and several output indicators under each outcome – many without a clear link to delivery of the outcome.

iii. The long-term work plan was not well tailored to deliver the project outcomes, which contributed to a low level of achievement against the results matrix in the initial four years.

iv. The fundamental premise of the project was questionable. Therefore, the achievability of the project objective was doubtful: it was not realistic that good practices from the Huangshan National Scenic Reserve would be easily transferable to 70 nature reserves with very different features, visitation levels, facilities, management structures, purposes and biodiversity values. This was particularly true given that the Huangshan National Scenic Reserve is one of the most visited protected areas of the People's Republic of China and that, at the time of design, there were few biodiversity conservation elements in its management.

3.1.1 Rating for relevance

52. Overall strategic relevance: Satisfactory.

53. Alignment with FAO and the GEF strategic priorities: Satisfactory. The project aligned with FAO and the GEF strategic priorities at the time of design and at completion.

54. Relevance to national, regional and global priorities and beneficiary needs: Satisfactory. The project was highly relevant to national, regional and global priorities, despite shortcomings in the design for meeting beneficiary needs.

55. Complementarity with existing interventions: Satisfactory. The project design was based on learnings from other GEF projects, particularly the component on Improving Management of Nature Reserves in Guangxi (GEF, 2006).

3.2 Effectiveness

56. Please see Appendix 5 for the results matrix, which shows achievements and summarizes the evidence and verification for each outcome and output indicator.

Finding 6. The project made a significant contribution to the creation of an integrated approach to the conservation and management of forest biodiversity in Huangshan Municipality (Evaluation Question 2.1; Outcome 1 and other outputs).

57. The project has made important contributions to mainstreaming biodiversity into planning and policies for socioeconomic development and forest management in Huangshan Municipality. In particular, biodiversity conservation was identified as a priority in both the 13th and 14th Municipal 5-Year Social and Economic Development Plans, released in 2016 and 2021, respectively, and has been mainstreamed into six sector Five-Year Plans. Several other policies and long-term plans were developed to address biodiversity conservation in the forest and nature reserves of Huangshan Municipality.

58. Permanent biodiversity committees were established. These have ongoing advisory roles within the municipality. However, it may be necessary to consolidate and review the roles of the committees upon project closure.

59. The nature reserve network, outlined under Outcome 2, has made an important contribution to creating an integrated approach. It has provided a user-friendly database and management system for information on flora and fauna, including monitoring. Combined with the sharing of good practices, this has set up systems that should continue to facilitate an integrated approach to the management of forest and nature reserves.

60. The main shortcoming in the creation of an integrated approach to the conservation and management of forest biodiversity in Huangshan Municipality is the limited progress with the 60 Tier 4 nature reserves adopting new approaches generated by the project (detailed under Outcome 4.1). Part of the reason for this is that it was somewhat unrealistic that good practices from the Huangshan Scenic Nature Reserve would be easily transferable to nature reserves with very different features, visitation levels and facilities, as well as management and biodiversity values. The Evaluation Team considers that a preferable approach to improving management of the Tier 4 nature reserves is to promote the adaptation of the community co-management approach and the Forest Chief Policy to develop a new model that empowers the community to manage the protected areas and their natural resources (see Recommendation 3).

61. Despite the limited progress with Tier 4 nature reserves adopting new approaches generated by the project, there was good progress towards improving their management. This was achieved by the cofinancing partner, Huangshan Municipality, and by including the nature reserves within the strict management area of the Huangshan ecological red line (Outcome 2.1a).

62. Ongoing reforms are underway for the protected area system in Huangshan Municipality. This is a top-down requirement that involves integrating protected areas and adjusting their boundaries and zoning. As part of this, the 60 Tier 4 county-level nature reserves have recently been integrated into 28 larger reserves that are classified as National Nature Reserves and Provincial Nature Reserves. The total area of these is 119 076 ha. These National Nature Reserves and Provincial Nature Reserves have independent authorities and staff to undertake management. The Huangshan Municipal Forestry Bureau oversees them.

63. Despite recent integration, this evaluation report continues to refer to Tier 3 and 4 nature reserves in order to show clear alignment of findings and recommendations with the project as designed and implemented. It will be necessary for the PMO and the Huangshan

Municipal Forestry Bureau to consider the tiers that nature reserves were assigned during when considering Recommendations 2 and 3 of this report.

Finding 7. The project made an excellent contribution to greater management efficiency in the 12 nature reserves and improved the status of these protected areas (Evaluation Question 2.2; Outcome 2 and other outputs).

64. The project successfully strengthened management efficiency in the 12 participating nature reserves, with average management efficiency increasing from 49.8 to 73.3 (a 47 percent increase) and all nature reserves showing substantial increases (Table 3). This intervention led to increased management effectiveness across 67 496 ha.

Table 3. Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool (METT) scores for the 12 nature reserves

Nature reserve	METT score		
	Baseline	2020	2022
Huangshan National Scenic Reserve	77	80	85
Qingliangfeng National Nature Reserve (Anhui)	55	83	85
Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve	45	73	75
Wuxishan Provincial Nature Reserve	38	68	71
Tianhushan County Nature Reserve	31	61	66
Lingnan Provincial Nature Reserve	37	74	76
Shilishan Provincial Nature Reserve	55	68	68
Gujiujiang National Nature Reserve	69	81	81
Zhawan Provincial Nature Reserve	36	67	67
Tianhu Provincial Nature Reserve	38	75	75
Huashan National Scenic Reserve	60	67	67
Qiyunshan National Scenic Reserve	57	64	64
Average	**49.8**	**71.8**	**73.3**

Source: Project Documentation. 2020, 2022. *METTs*

65. Six nature reserves now have strong administrative measures and management plans in place, which have set a new standard in the municipality for systematic and participatory planning (Output 2.1.2). These interventions were highly valued by nature reserve beneficiaries.

Finding 8. The project made a good contribution to strengthened institutional capacity and public and political support for the conservation of biodiversity in the forest ecosystems of the People's Republic of China's (Evaluation Question 2.3; Outcome 3 and other outputs).

66. The project implemented extensive biodiversity-related activities and developed many relevant materials for schools. HSAC and Green Anhui contributed to this through cofinancing. The target to mainstream biodiversity into curricula (Outcome 3.1 and Output 3.2.2) was only partially achieved because it is difficult to formally change curricula. It would have been beneficial if this difficulty had been identified early on and the indicator changed to something more achievable.

67. As described under Finding 6, biodiversity conservation has been mainstreamed into six sector Five-Year Plans, which is a very important measure in the institutional planning system of the People's Republic of China.

68. From reporting received on visitation rates to three nature reserves (Lingnan Nature Reserve, Wuxishan Nature Reserve and Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve), the target for the increase in visitation from 8 000 to 80 000 (Outcome 3.3) can be considered achieved. However, it is not clear whether this can be attributed to any interventions by the project.

69. Institutional capacities were fostered by extensive training and capacity building for nature reserve staff, government officials and community members (Output 3.1.1 and 3.1.2). The training of 5 000 tourist guides as a "shortcut" to communicate biodiversity information to tourists was an excellent additional innovation that had not been not envisaged in the project document.

70. Finally, the project supported the development of a biodiversity interpretation centre and interpretive materials for 80 km of trails at the Huangshan National Scenic Reserve. This is important because the high biodiversity values were previously not well explained to visitors. The interpretive materials for the trails were funded by cofinancing.

Finding 9. There was satisfactory documentation of good practices. However, there is no evidence that good practices and lessons learned from the project are being taken up and replicated elsewhere in the non-participating nature reserves, especially in Tier 4 nature reserves (Evaluation Question 2.4; Outcome 4).

71. The project has identified and published seven good practices in three publications (Output 4.1.2) and has implemented peer-to-peer workshops to facilitate the sharing of experiences among nature reserve staff (Output 4.1.3).

72. As described elsewhere, there is limited progress with the 60 Tier 4 nature reserves adopting new approaches generated by the project (Outcome 4.1).

Finding 10. There are barriers to further progress towards achievement of the project's outcomes and objectives, particularly the lack of uptake by Tier 3 and 4 nature reserves, and the lack of a sustainability and scaling up plan for the sustainable livelihood components (Evaluation Question 2.5).

73. The lack of uptake of management approaches in Tier 3 and 4 nature reserves will require fresh approaches when the project is completed. For Tier 4 nature reserves, a barrier is the high number of reserves (60) and the lack of a traditional protected area management

framework for them. It is important that the approach to improving their management works with relevant communities on co-management in the context of the municipality's forest management system.

74. There is a risk that the sustainable livelihood activities will not continue or be scaled up after project completion. The main barrier is the lack of a sustainability and scaling up plan for these components, and this should be included in the project sustainability plan that is being developed.

Finding 11. Working with communities on alternative livelihoods was limited in extent, partly because it was a weakness in the project design. The Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui were NGOs that led this work in communities around the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve with contributions from the GEF (Output 2.1.3).

75. Three local community co-management committees were formed. Patrolling guards have been employed from the villages to reduce the impacts of poaching and illegal collection of other products from the forests. Training and direct support was provided to the communities to encourage sustainable livelihoods that place less pressure on the natural resources of the forest and nature reserves, with support provided to develop livelihoods in tea, local products, shrimp, rice and homestays.

76. As described elsewhere, these aspects of the project were not well defined in the project document, and the allocated budget was limited (see Section 2.1). Therefore, this part of the GEF intervention was limited in extent. Also, the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui strongly contributed to these activities with the communities around the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve. This included the implementation of their own activities, and Green Anhui delivering some activities under contract to the PMO. This made it somewhat unclear in evaluating exactly what the GEF contributions were.

77. Importantly, the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui will continue their entrusted management arrangement at the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve and in the surrounding area. It is highly likely that they will continue to work with those target communities on community co-management and alternative livelihoods (see Box 2).

78. During the site visit, village beneficiaries spoke positively about the support they received and the improvements to their income. This was observed, even though the GEF project did not have a high profile since the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui had a greater profile as the "face" of the initiatives. It is important that the GEF profile is maintained when work is outsourced and, if appropriate, during other partnerships as part of projects.

Box 2. Innovation and community engagement at the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve: the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui

The Paradise Foundation is a non-profit environmental organization based on an institutional planning system that develops "new business paradigms" for nature conservation.

At the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve, west of the Huangshan Scenic Nature Reserve, the Paradise Foundation implements an entrusted reserve management model. This involves an agreement between the Paradise Foundation, the reserve and the County Bureau of Forestry, under which the conservation management of the reserve has been entrusted to the NGO for 50 years. Green Anhui delivers the agreement for the Paradise Foundation, including daily

patrolling, fire prevention, nematode disease prevention and monitoring. The agreement includes mechanisms to ensure that agreed commitments are met.

This model enables additional management activities for the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve by using funds that are additional to core nature reserve funding. This is the first time that it has been applied to eastern China.

At the same time, the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui are working with communities surrounding the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve by developing community conservation committees (CCCs), implementing alternative livelihood activities, monitoring and managing their community protected areas, and building a corridor between reserves. The Paradise Foundation uses creative financing mechanisms to fund this work, including paying salaries for villagers to undertake patrolling on their protected areas.

The GEF project is a partner in this work by providing support to the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve as a Tier 2 nature reserve in the project and by collaborating on the work with the community.

Finding 12. All indicator species that were monitored showed stable or increasing population measures, even though some plant monitoring was incomplete (Outcome 2.1b).

79. The monitoring undertaken by the project showed that all species remained stable or increased. Some of these, such as the frog *Paa spinosa*, are likely to be the direct result of reductions in the collection of wild animals and the reduction of human impacts in Huangshan nature reserves.

80. The indicator for Outcome 2.1b (c) was to monitor four indicator plant species over the life of the project, with baselines to be set in the first year. Three of the four species were changed for valid technical reasons. However, this change did not happen until late in the project. The baselines were collected in 2021 – year 7 of the project. It is important that any such changes are identified early and that technical justification is prepared in a timely manner. This would enable changes to be endorsed and the intent of outcomes and indicators to still be met during the project term.

Finding 13. The project has improved on documenting and communicating key messages since the mid-term evaluation (Evaluation Question 2.6).

81. Among the many improvements that have occurred since the mid-term evaluation, documenting and communicating key messages has been one of them. The project website is of high quality, the computer-based nature reserve network will greatly facilitate information access and sharing, and the project exceeded the target for the documentation of good practices.

Finding 14. The project has made solid contributions towards long-term impact, as identified in the reconstructed TOC. This involves: investments in mainstreaming biodiversity into planning and policies; building capacity; preparing nature reserve management plans; disseminating good practices; building the nature reserve network and website; and strong partnerships (Evaluation Questions 9.1, 9.2).

Finding 15. The project achieved additionality through some interventions, especially the support for nature reserves to effectively plan for management and biodiversity conservation, and the establishment of CCCs (Evaluation Question 11.1).

82. One of the strengths of the project's implementation is that the GEF interventions have mostly been well targeted on measures that will continue beyond the life of the project:

building institutional and individual capacity and capability; mainstreaming biodiversity into planning and policies; and sharing information and good practices.

83. The project has had some strong observable impacts. For example, nature reserve staff were unanimous in their praise for reserve management planning and the rigorous approach that the project brought to this. They indicated that this has improved management outcomes in their reserves. The training also improved attitudes and understanding. As stated to the evaluation team by a nature reserve staff member, the project "helped change our mindset of what a protected area really means."

84. The Huangshan Scenic Nature Reserve, a location of high biodiversity significance and very high visitor numbers, now has detailed biodiversity conservation objectives for the first time.

85. Also, the implemented biological investigations and monitoring have generated a lot of new information about the biodiversity of Huangshan and its nature reserves, including plants, animals and insects. Several new insect species were described from collections made during the project. Strong partnerships with the Anhui and Huangshan institutions mean that this expanding scientific knowledge will continue to be owned by experts from the province and the municipality.

3.2.1 Rating for effectiveness

86. Overall assessment of project results: Satisfactory.

87. Delivery of project outputs: Satisfactory. The project delivered most outputs and met most associated indicators.

88. Progress towards project objective: Moderately satisfactory. The project made good general progress towards the objective, but there was limited progress towards good practices being adopted by Tier 4 nature reserves.

89. Progress towards Outcome 1: Satisfactory. The project made a significant contribution to the creation of an integrated approach to the conservation and management of forest biodiversity in Huangshan Municipality.

90. Progress towards Outcome 2: Satisfactory. The project made an excellent contribution to greater management efficiency in the 12 nature reserves and improved the status of these protected areas.

91. Progress towards Outcome 3: Satisfactory. The project made a good contribution to increased institutional capacity and public and political support for the conservation of biodiversity in the forest ecosystems of the People's Republic of China.

92. Progress towards Outcome 4: Moderately satisfactory. There was satisfactory documentation of good practices. However, there is little evidence that good practices and lessons learned from the project are being taken up and replicated elsewhere in the non-participating nature reserves, especially Tier 4 nature reserves.

93. Overall rating of progress towards achieving objectives and outcomes: Satisfactory.

94. Likelihood of impact: Satisfactory. The project's investments in mainstreaming biodiversity into planning and policies; building capacity, preparing nature reserve management plans; disseminating good practices; building the nature reserve network and website; and establishing strong partnerships mean that impacts are likely.

3.3 Efficiency

Finding 16. Because the first execution agreement for this project was developed in 2014, prior to the issuance of clear corporate guidance on indirect execution through OPIM, this project with "pre-OPIM modality" experienced a range of delays and implementation challenges (Evaluation Question 3.2).

95. The project was implemented under an indirect execution modality that involved FAO delegating the implementation of project results to the operational partner, HSAC. The execution agreement for this arrangement was first negotiated in 2014, before FAO's OPIM became operational with the issuance of Manual Section 701 (MS701/OPIM) in late 2015 (FAO, 2015). This means that the project was not implemented under OPIM and the modality is instead referred to hereafter as a "pre-OPIM modality." This project is one of five projects being implemented in the People's Republic of China under this pre-OPIM modality, approved on an exceptional basis to enable indirect execution by a national partner before the OPIM was available. This pre-OPIM modality will not continue when these projects end. Nevertheless, there are learnings from this project that are relevant to the application of OPIM in other projects.

96. MS701/OPIM provides detailed guidance on engaging with operational partners and implementing projects through the OPIM, including negotiation of an operational partner agreement. Because MS701/OPIM had not been available for this project, there was little corporate FAO guidance available on indirect execution when the execution agreement was negotiated. This caused a lack of clarity on critical matters such as the proportion of GEF funds that should be transferred to the operational partner; the responsibility for key quality assurance and evaluation activities; the respective responsibilities for technical oversight; and monitoring and management of the operational partner's performance using a risk-based approach. A consequence is that the execution agreement was revised several times, leading to major delays.

97. A significant reason for the need to revise the execution agreement was that the first version, signed in September 2014, committed to transferring 100 percent of the project's GEF funds to the operational partner. This was not appropriate because it meant that no GEF funds were available for FAO to carry out project management and oversight activities. The execution agreement was intensively renegotiated to address this shortcoming (and three other matters). However, this first amendment to the execution agreement was not signed until June/July 2017. The Evaluation Team was not able to get a detailed understanding of the reasons for this long delay in renegotiating the agreement between 2015 and 2017 because the FAO staff involved in the negotiations are no longer involved with the project. Regardless, the key reasons are believed to be: staff turnover at FAO China during that period; a lack of understanding of what should be in such an agreement; a lack of understanding of the mechanisms of transferring external funding to Chinese government agencies; and a lack of agreement of what activities and roles should be retained by FAO and how they should be funded.

98. These renegotiations led to major delays in the flow of GEF funds and in the delivery of project results. Although the first execution agreement was signed in September 2014, the first instalment was not received until January 2015. The second instalment was not received until December 2017, after execution of the revised execution agreement in June/July of that year.

99. The mid-term evaluation detailed some other consequences of the delays and renegotiations. In particular, the mid-term evaluation described "a breakdown in trust and communication between the PM [project manager] and FAO … which fundamentally interrupted healthy implementation" (FAO, 2020, p. xviii). The team for this terminal evaluation found that this lack of trust and poor communication had since been resolved (see Finding 17).

100. The Evaluation Team heard from some FAO staff that the terms of the project's execution agreement meant that it was difficult for FAO to provide appropriate technical support to the project. This was due to poor clarity of responsibilities and a conflicting understanding of roles. However, not all interviewed FAO staff who were involved with technical support for the project found this to be a concern. Given the role of FAO as a specialized agency with technical expertise, and the importance of bringing global good practices to GEF projects, it is important that the provision of technical support continues in projects with indirect execution and that this is reflected appropriately in operational partner agreements.

101. These findings are particularly important for projects such as this, in which the operational partner is a municipal-level reserve management bureau.

Finding 17. After a very slow start, due largely to delays in negotiating the execution agreement, implementation efficiency has improved significantly since 2018 and has been especially high since the mid-term evaluation (Evaluation Questions 3.1, 3.6, 3.7).

102. As described under Finding 16, there were major delays at the start of the project. This was due largely to the prolonged period to renegotiate the execution agreement and the associated slow delivery of funding: it took approximately two years for funding to flow. At the time of the mid-term evaluation in May 2019, after approximately five years, only 23 percent of funds had been expended.

103. As reported in the mid-term evaluation, FAO staff had made concerted efforts to get the project back on track since 2018. This included a mission to Huangshan between 20 and 23 March 2018, as documented in a four-page *Aide Memoire*. It involved the FAO budget holder, the lead technical officer, the financial liaison officer, the portfolio officer, and key personnel from the PMO, the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve and the Paradise Foundation. This represented the start of a major improvement in communication, support and oversight.

104. A strong recommendation of the mid-term evaluation was to engage a technically competent CTA who was familiar with GEF goals and strategies to provide technical guidance and accelerate the project implementation with an eye on the end results. The mid-term evaluators stated that "if this is not agreed to, then as a fundamental MTE [mid-term evaluation] condition for success this project should be stopped." (FAO, 2020, p. xvi). This recommendation was followed and a CTA was engaged in 2020. As a result, the project's focus on outcomes and outputs in the results matrix improved dramatically, as

verified by the Evaluation Team through the assessment of project reporting and in interviews.

105. The mid-term evaluation also recommended a "no-cost extension" of two years to make up for the "lost" first two years. This extension was subsequently granted. Two additional extensions were later granted, for a combined additional 18 months, so that the project could finalize its activities under continued COVID-19 restrictions and challenges. As stressed by FAO staff during interviews, such extensions are not "no cost" because they impose additional costs for continuing project management and oversight: the fixed GEF fee retained by FAO is now stretched across nine years rather than the original five years.

106. Importantly, the mid-term evaluation noted that the delays affected the original project context of "policy by doing" through Tier 1 and 2 nature reserves, and of the nature reserve learning network influencing Tiers 3 and 4 (FAO, 2020, p. 29). The implications of this can be seen at the terminal evaluation, with limited learnings having been transferred to Tiers 3 and 4.

Finding 18. The pre-OPIM indirect execution modality had some clear benefits for the operational partner, but it created significant challenges when rolled out early in the project. This continued to create significant human resource demands that created some inefficiencies (Evaluation Question 3.6).

107. The main benefits of the pre-OPIM indirect execution modality were in encouraging municipal ownership and, through that, increasing the likelihood of sustainable results.

108. The process for the first two years, when the agreement was negotiated and relationships were strained, was difficult for the PMO and HSAC. This was a new modality for the People's Republic of China, and one interviewee described "feeling like a guinea pig" – that is, that they were being used to trial a new and unknown approach. Given that clear guidance was not available because MS701/OPIM had not yet been issued, and that FAO had little experience at that stage with negotiating and delivering projects through indirect execution, this is unsurprising. It was especially difficult for a municipal agency such as HSAC, which has limited experience and capacity in such matters and with donor-funded projects in general. It is important that this level of capacity is considered when negotiating agreements for indirect execution and that support and capacity building be provided if required (Recommendation 5).

109. The Evaluation Team also heard from interviewees that reporting requirements under this pre-OPIM modality, especially financial reporting, are complicated and demanding, and create significant human resource demands. This should also be considered when negotiating and implementing projects through indirect execution, and support and capacity building should be provided if required (Recommendation 5).

110. As described under Finding 16, the Evaluation Team also heard from some FAO staff that, because of the execution agreement, it was difficult for FAO to provide appropriate technical support to the project.

Finding 19. Given excellent cofinancing, the active participation of the executing partner and the delivery of additional related results by NGO partners, the project was cost-effective (Evaluation Questions 3.3, 3.6).

111. The materialized cofinancing exceeded that committed in the project document (see Appendix 4) and was a real contribution to this project. The project also formed effective partnerships that added value to the project's activities, especially with the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui, as well as in and around the Jiulongfeng Provincial Natural Reserve.

112. Given these factors, the active involvement of HSAC and the likely sustainability of most project results, the project was a cost-effective use of USD 2.6 million of GEF funds.

Finding 20. The project has shown some building of synergies and complementarities with other projects and avoided duplication (Evaluation Question 3.4).

113. The design was based on learnings from other GEF projects. In particular, the GEF-supported component on Improving Management of Nature Reserves for a Guangxi Integrated Forestry Development and Conservation Project (GEF, 2006) informed some key project approaches to nature reserves: (i) a bottom-up approach to nature reserve planning and management; (ii) increased public participation in nature reserve planning and management processes through co-management and the creation of CCCs; (iii) a more scientific basis for monitoring and decision-making in nature reserve management; and (iv) building networks with other institutions to broaden understanding and glean political and financial support.

114. There was limited involvement with the current national protected area reform agenda and with the national government's protected area system reform programme (GEF, 2016) that is being implemented. This involves six projects to "transform China's national protected area system through systematic legal and institutional reform and innovation for conservation of globally significant biodiversity" (Ibidem).

3.3.1 Rating for efficiency

115. Efficiency: Moderately satisfactory. After a very slow start, implementation efficiency has improved significantly since 2018 and has been especially high since the mid-term evaluation. The project was cost-effective.

3.4 Sustainability

Finding 21. The project's results are moderately likely to be sustainable, given the effective investments in mainstreaming biodiversity into planning and policies; building capacity; preparing nature reserve management plans; documenting and disseminating good practices; building the nature reserve network and website; and the strong partnerships established. Risks to sustainability arise from the lack of uptake by non-participating nature reserves of good practices and lessons learned (as described in Finding 9), and the lack of a strategy for sustaining and scaling up the work with communities on alternative livelihoods (Evaluation Question 4.1).

116. Because most of the project's interventions have been well targeted on measures that will continue beyond the life of the project (building institutional and individual capacity and capability, mainstreaming biodiversity into planning and policies, and sharing information and good practices), most project results are likely to be sustainable. In particular:

    i. Management will continue to be better in reserves that received direct support in the form of management planning and capacity building.

ii. Municipal planning and policies now have biodiversity mainstreamed into them.

iii. Biodiversity monitoring is being implemented and information is being shared between nature reserves and other stakeholders, including the public.

iv. Strong partnerships and ownership have been built within Anhui Province and Huangshan Municipality, including with NGOs and scientific institutions.

117. The lack of progress with the 60 Tier 4 nature reserves adopting practices generated by the project means that there are risks to the sustainability of results in improving the management of those reserves. A new approach will be required to address this (see Recommendation 3).

118. Also, as described elsewhere, the project's direct involvement in working with the community on CCCs and alternative livelihoods was limited and became closely linked with the work being undertaken by the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui. Although it is likely that the work of these NGOs will continue, it is important that the project identifies a strategy for sustaining and scaling up the work with communities on alternative livelihoods. This should be included in the sustainability strategy that is in development (see Recommendation 1).

Finding 22. The project established institutional arrangements and cross-sector partnerships that are likely to be sustainable (Evaluation Question 4.2).

119. As part of the project, a permanent Biodiversity Coordination Committee, chaired by the mayor of Huangshan Municipality, and the BAC were established. This is an important new institutional arrangement in the municipality. A Project Leading Group was also established by the municipality. These arrangements may need consolidation after project completion (Recommendation 6).

120. The computer-based nature reserve network has the potential to play an important role in sustaining some of the project's results. The Evaluation Team understands that the municipality is committed to maintaining this network.

121. The strong local partnerships developed by the project have bolstered ownership of the results and the direction of the project. For example, the Evaluation Team interviewed several experts from Huangshan Municipality and Anhui Province who were enthusiastic about the biological investigations and monitoring that had occurred, and who were committed to continuing this.

Finding 23. There has been limited effective replication and scaling up of results and experiences, although mechanisms have been developed that should assist replication and scaling up (such as good practices documentation and dissemination, the nature reserve network, and strong partnerships, including with NGOs) (Evaluation Question 4.3).

122. A fundamental element of this project's strategy is the replication and scaling up of good practices from Tier 1 and 2 reserves to Tier 3 and 4 reserves. As described elsewhere, there has been limited success with this, especially for Tier 4 nature reserves. Nevertheless, the mechanisms built by the project, such as good practices documentation and dissemination, the nature reserve network, initiatives with communities on forest management, and strong partnerships, should assist with replication and scaling up.

123. Similarly, as described elsewhere, it is not clear how the results of the GEF interventions with CCCs and alternative livelihoods will be replicated and scaled up, but it is considered that the mechanisms and partnerships developed by the project will assist with this.

124. The key is for the project to finalize an effective strategy for sustainability and scaling up (see Recommendation 1). It would be beneficial in future projects if such a strategy were developed early. The most effective sustainability strategies are those that have been considered throughout project implementation rather than at the end.

Finding 24. The pre-OPIM indirect execution modality contributed to the municipal ownership of results and strengthened municipal capacity, which are expected to assist with the sustainability of results (Evaluation Question 4.4).

125. As described under Finding 18, there were benefits to the pre-OPIM modality because it contributed to capacity development and ownership within the municipality. This is a key factor in the likelihood of sustainable results. Also, some interviewees considered it important that FAO use such a modality with government agencies in the People's Republic of China, acknowledging most agencies' high capability and building trust and relationships.

126. Notwithstanding these benefits of the pre-OPIM modality, it is important to reiterate the challenges posed by the modality: a very slow start due to the lack of guidance on indirect execution in 2014 and the challenges deriving from the flow-on effect of the implementation; the perception that the project and HSAC were used to test a new model; capacity limitations during negotiations (noting that HSAC had very little experience with such negotiations); capacity and human resource demands during implementation; and the difficulties for FAO to provide technical support.

127. The pre-OPIM modality had little effect on the national or provincial ownership of results because there was limited involvement of national and provincial agencies in the project.

Finding 25. The project decreased sustainability risks by ensuring technical guidance and oversight across all results, as recommended by the mid-term evaluation. However, little progress was made with regard to the needs of Tier 3 and 4 nature reserves (Evaluation Question 4.5).

128. The engagement of a qualified and experienced CTA was key to this project turning its performance around and decreasing sustainability risks by ensuring technical guidance and oversight across all results.

3.4.1 Rating for sustainability

129. D1. Overall likelihood of risks to sustainability: Sustainability is moderately likely in that there are moderate risks to it. The project's interventions have been well targeted on measures that build institutional and individual capacity and capability (including within villages), mainstream biodiversity into planning and policies, and facilitate sharing information and good practices. There are risks and uncertainties to sustainability and scaling up for improving management of Tier 4 nature reserves and alternative livelihood activities.

130. D1.1 Financial risks: Sustainability is moderately likely. There is regular municipal funding, but it is not sufficient for all nature reserves in the municipality. Opportunities could be

considered to extend the entrusted management model with the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui.

131. D1.2 Sociopolitical risks: Sustainability is likely in that there is little or no risk to sustainability. The project is very consistent with national priorities and therefore has strong support at all levels of government. The project's alternative livelihood activities are supported by the communities surrounding nature reserves. However, the profile of the GEF project could be improved. There is some risk if these communities do not feel that the support will continue.

132. D1.3 Institutional and governance risks: Sustainability is likely. The project improved institutional arrangements, including the establishment of permanent biodiversity committees and greater institutional and individual capacity. There are no significant institutional and governance risks.

133. D1.4. Environmental risks: Sustainability is likely. There are no significant environmental risks to the sustainability of project results. Climate change presents a threat to biodiversity in the municipality, but the measures put in place should assist managers in addressing impacts.

134. D2. Catalysis and replication: Moderately satisfactory. Some relevant measures are in place, such as the sharing of good practices, the nature reserve network and website, and monitoring. However, catalysis and replication for Tier 3 and 4 nature reserves and the alternative livelihoods work are not strong and should be addressed in the project sustainability plan.

3.5 Factors affecting performance

Finding 26. The project design had shortcomings that led to implementation challenges (Evaluation Questions 5.1, 5.2).

135. The shortcomings in project design that led to implementation challenges are described under Relevance.

136. Some changes to the results matrix were made after the mid-term evaluation in response to the project being complicated and very ambitious. These changes were appropriate and underwent the required approvals.

137. With 38 indicators and confusing relationships between outcomes and outputs, the results matrix was difficult to report against and contributed to early performance issues. The sharpened focus brought by the engagement of the CTA was key in addressing this. It is important that such focus on how indicators will be measured and reported against is brought early into projects.

138. Because the design was weak in defining how good practices would be transferable to Tier 3 and 4 nature reserves and how improvements would be measured, this is one of the few areas of shortcomings in the project's final achievements.

3.5.1 Monitoring and evaluation system

Finding 27. The M&E plan at the point of project endorsement was generally practical and sufficient, although the project's results matrix was large and confusing. There were no gender-disaggregated targets or other reporting requirements.

139. Section 4.5 The project document's monitoring and reporting element provided a detailed description and budget for the project's M&E. This included oversight and monitoring responsibilities, indicators and information sources, reports and their schedule, and an M&E budget.

140. The M&E plan included the standard FAO and GEF requirements, and was clear about responsibilities and timing. The M&E budget was USD 196 700, which is 7.5 percent of the GEF grant. This is a relatively high percentage for such projects, although it includes a PMO staff member (full-time M&E officer) budgeted at USD 84 900. When this staff cost is excluded, other M&E costs are USD 111 800 or 4.3 percent of the GEF grant, which is appropriate.

141. The project's results matrix was large with 38 indicators. This created a high monitoring and reporting burden. It was also somewhat difficult to understand the relationships between different outcomes and outputs, which further complicated monitoring and reporting. The results matrix contained most baseline data, although some indicators were to have baselines determined soon after project launch.

142. Component 4 of the project includes the implementation of the M&E plan.

143. There were no gender-disaggregated targets or other reporting requirements in the M&E plan, as described in Section 3.6.1 (Gender). This GEF-5 project did not undertake a gender analysis, as this was not required at the time, and did not include any specific actions or reporting that addressed gender issues.

Finding 28. M&E was implemented in accordance with the M&E plan.

144. The project closely followed the M&E plan, including:

i. the project inception report for the inception workshop dated 23 October 2014;
ii. annual workplans and budgets;
iii. detailed project progress reports (PPRs) that were prepared for all six-month periods, covering progress updates, inputs, actions taken to address shortcomings or risks, a workplan and budget for the next reporting period, and a list of relevant reports;
iv. the annual project implementation review from 2016 to 2022 (not prepared in 2015 due to delays in the project launch);
v. cofinancing reports (annual reporting included in the project implementation reviews);
vi. GEF-5 tracking tools that were prepared at project endorsement and mid-term, and were completed in a timely manner;
vii. mid-term evaluation completed in 2019; and
viii. final evaluation (this report).

145. The project also prepared a detailed self-assessment report that was provided to the Evaluation Team during the evaluation and was of assistance to the team. This report contained final reporting, useful insights and lessons learned, even though reporting against many of the indicators in the results matrix was incomplete or did not sufficiently address the wording of the indicator or target. Evidence of achievements was gradually accumulated during the evaluation using a diverse range of sources. For future projects, it is important that projects agree early on how each indicator and target will be measured and verified and that evidence is gathered in a timely manner before commencement of the mid-term evaluation and terminal evaluation.

146. There were minor amendments to the M&E plan: some changes were made to targets in the results matrix to simplify and rationalize reporting, as described elsewhere. Although some informal gender-disaggregated reporting was provided for training and participation (see Section 3.6.1), the project would have benefited from the M&E plan being amended during implementation to formally include gender-disaggregated reporting.

3.5.2 Quality of implementation and execution

Finding 29. HSAC effectively discharged its role and responsibilities related to the management and administration of the project (Evaluation Question 5.4).

147. As the executing partner, HSAC effectively discharged its role and responsibilities to manage the project's day-to-day activities and ensure the appropriate use of funds, procurement and contracting of goods and services to the GEF.

148. HSAC was results-focused and took strong ownership of the project. During the delays at the start of the project, HSAC cofinancing was essential in delivering early results that provided a foundation for further work when GEF funding was released.

149. The project and the pre-OPIM indirect execution modality were a learning process for HSAC, and capacity and experience were initially low. Also, relationships and trust with FAO were low for several years, as described by the mid-term evaluation. This affected project morale and progress, but these issues were resolved and relationships were strong at the time of this terminal evaluation.

150. Additional challenges to project progress arose from inadequate staffing levels at the PMO, especially in the first half of the project. This was a shortcoming of HSAC as the executing partner. Staffing levels improved over time, despite high staff turnover that had affected historical knowledge and continuity.

Finding 30. FAO effectively delivered oversight, supervision and backstopping during the second half of the project, although the effectiveness of this and the relationships with the executing partner were low during the first half (Evaluation Questions 5.11, 5.9).

151. During this terminal evaluation, FAO was providing effective oversight, supervision and backstopping. Feedback during interviews about FAO's oversight and support was positive, indicating that staff were responsive and addressed challenges to implementation.

152. FAO was also effectively involved in project identification, formulation and approval by developing a project that has relevance to national, FAO and GEF priorities. It is providing proactive oversight to project completion and evaluation, with a strong outlook for learning to improve future processes and results.

153. FAO oversight and backstopping was weak for several years after the project had commenced in 2014. As described under Finding 17, a concerted effort since 2018 has seen greater attention by FAO China in communicating with and supporting the PMO and HSAC. This has led to the very good levels of trust among FAO, HSAC and the PMO. This was also benefited by engagement in FAO China regarding a second GEF portfolio officer, which doubled the capacity of this important function.

154. Risk management by FAO was generally adequate and addressed in each project implementation review. However, efforts between 2014 and 2017 to address fundamental risks to the project due to the lack of funds, the absence of an execution agreement and poor relationships were inadequate.

155. Regarding risks to project delivery, no risks were identified during implementation in meeting Outcome 4.1 (adoption of good practices by Tier 4 nature reserves), despite little progress towards this outcome. Also, improved wildlife populations are believed to be causing increased human-wildlife conflict, especially with boars and monkeys. Both the project and a study commissioned at the Huangshan National Scenic Reserve noticed such a risk. However, this was not identified and addressed as a project risk despite the potential for negative outcomes to discourage communities from participating.

Finding 31. Capacity and human resources were not adequate for the negotiation of agreements and implementation under the pre-OPIM indirect execution modality. This does not necessarily mean that financial resources were inadequate. Development of capacity among staff is required (Evaluation Question 5.8).

Finding 32. The most significant challenges faced by the project related to establishing processes and building implementation and oversight capacity during the first half. Restrictions caused by COVID-19 also hindered the project (Evaluation Questions 5.9, 5.10).

3.5.3 Financial management and mobilization of expected cofinancing

Finding 33. Actual cofinancing exceeded the sum committed and made a real contribution to the project, including additional leveraged cofinancing from the Paradise Foundation (Evaluation Question 8.1).

156. Appendix 4 shows the materialized and committed cofinancing for the project. The materialized cofinancing significantly exceeded that committed at CEO endorsement (total committed: USD 10 508 212; total materialized: USD 18 294 097).

157. The main contributions were from HSAC and the Huangshan Municipal Bureau of Finance, both of which significantly exceeded their commitments. These contributions were real and significant for the project. The day-to-day management, equipment and infrastructure for the Huangshan National Scenic Reserve and the other reserves in the municipality, as well as the ongoing municipal policies and planning, were vital foundations on which the GEF incremental funding was built. These agencies also contributed to or fully funded several important project components, especially during the early stages, which is detailed as follows:

i. important policy, monitoring, co-management, education and results sharing during the first two years (reported by the mid-term evaluation);

ii. project management during the first two years;

iii. the master plan for Huangshan Municipal tourism development (Huangshan Municipal Tourism Bureau, 1991) and the Huangshan National Scenic Reserve Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan;

iv. reserve management plans; and

v. interpretation materials at the Huangshan National Scenic Reserve.

158. Another significant source of cofinancing is from the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui. Although Green Anhui was identified as a partner and PSC member in the project document, there was no cofinancing commitment associated with this. The Paradise Foundation became involved after project design. The involvement of the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui at the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve and with communities in the surrounding forest is a productive added value to this project (see Box 2). They have been valuable project partners: the reported cofinancing of USD 1 725 981 reflects this contribution. It should be noted that there is some overlap and lack of clarity on the respective inputs from the GEF, and the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui, with the communities, especially since some work was undertaken by Green Anhui under contract to the GEF.

159. The materialized FAO cofinancing (USD 326 787) also exceeded that committed (USD 237 900). A contribution was reported from the village producers (USD 124 546), but this did not meet the committed funding (USD 436 500).

160. This successful materialization of cofinancing, especially from the municipal government (including HSAC), demonstrates the importance of project design and implementation being strongly anchored in the priorities and needs of the relevant government agencies. This was particularly demonstrated during the first two years when government cofinancing kept the project running and delivered the initial outputs.

3.5.4 Project partnerships and stakeholder engagement and ownership

Finding 34. Although a stakeholder engagement strategy had not been developed, most stakeholders were positively engaged and had a good understanding and ownership of the project. The project engaged local actors well, especially NGOs, even though the participating communities mostly had contact with the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui (Evaluation Questions 5.3, 5.5, 5.6, 5.7).

161. A stakeholder strategy was not developed during project design or implementation. Nevertheless, most stakeholders were positively engaged. The nature reserve staff had a very good understanding and ownership of the purpose and components of the project. The villagers were very positive about the benefits from the project and generally understood that the aim of supporting alternative livelihoods was to relieve pressure on the natural resources and species in the forest and the nature reserves.

162. During interviews with village beneficiaries, the Evaluation Team found that the profile of FAO and the GEF, and an understanding of the aims of the GEF project, were low. This is partly because these parts of the project have been implemented in partnership with the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui, which have a higher profile than FAO and the GEF as the "face" of the initiatives. Also, some activities were outsourced to Green Anhui by the project. The mid-term evaluation had a similar observation at Jiulongfeng, noting "the lack of visibility of the GEF and FAO logos on these endeavours" (FAO, 2020, p. 24).

163. Local actors were engaged during the design process, with many consultations and group discussions to identify needs and discuss the project's strategy, activities and priorities. Consequently, most project activities have been relevant to local needs, with the exception of the aim to replicate learnings from Tier 1 and 2 nature reserves to Tier 3 and 4 nature reserves, which is unrealistic.

164. The project engaged local actors very well during implementation, especially the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui. Partnerships with local institutions, within Huangshan Municipality and Anhui Province, were very strong and will be important for the sustainability of results.

165. Because the project is highly consistent with national priorities, it has strong support at all political levels. Institutions and NGOs interviewed all showed support for the project's aims and activities. The only area in which concern was mentioned involved elevated human-wildlife conflict as environmental protection leads to higher animal populations. It is important that human-wildlife conflict is considered during the design and implementation of projects such as this, which work closely with rural communities on diversifying their livelihoods.

3.5.5 Communications, knowledge management and knowledge products

Finding 35. There was a high level of understanding of the project's aims, results and components, especially among staff of the nature reserves participating in the project. This shows that the communication of these has been effective, despite a lower understanding of the project details among village beneficiaries. Most lessons and knowledge sharing has been effective, but there was no evidence of the successful adoption of good practices by Tier 4 nature reserves (Evaluation Question 10.1).

166. Despite a slow start to knowledge management and good practices, as documented in the mid-term evaluation, the project met it targets by project closure. It published good practices, built a high-quality website linked to the HSAC site and established a computer-based nature reserve network. This was backed by extensive training and capacity building over the course of the project.

167. Consequently, the Evaluation Team found that there was a high level of understanding of the project's aims, results and components, especially among nature reserve staff participating in the project. Understanding was lower among village beneficiaries.

168. Also, the Evaluation Team has seen little evidence that the project's communications and knowledge products have reached the Tier 4 nature reserves or that there has been a successful adoption of good practices by those nature reserves.

169. The project did not develop a communications strategy, but a training plan was developed to inform training and capacity development activities.

Finding 36. The project's communications and knowledge products have the potential to support sustainability and scaling up. The sustainability plan that is being developed should include this consideration (Evaluation Question 10.2).

170. The communications and knowledge products described above will continue beyond project closure. This includes a three-year maintenance contract for the project website,

linked to the HSAC site. These will be important and should be considered in the project sustainability plan.

3.5.6 Rating for factors affecting performance

171. E1. Project design and readiness: Moderately unsatisfactory. The project was developed in consideration of national priorities and local needs, and included important initiatives. However, there were flaws in the causal logic and the fundamental project premise of transferring knowledge from Tier 1 and 2 nature reserves to Tier 3 and 4 nature reserves.

172. E2 Quality of project implementation: Moderately satisfactory.

173. E2.1 Quality of project implementation by FAO: Moderately satisfactory. FAO implementation had been weak until 2018. Relationships with HSAC and the PMO were also weak. However, implementation has been strong since then.

174. E2.1 Project oversight: Moderately satisfactory. Project oversight had been weak until 2018 but has been strong since then.

175. E3. Quality of project execution by HSAC: Satisfactory. HSAC effectively discharged its role and responsibilities related to the management and administration of the project.

176. E4. Financial management and cofinancing: Highly satisfactory. Materialized cofinancing exceeded committed financing at CEO endorsement and was a real component of the project.

177. E5. Project partnerships and stakeholder engagement: Moderately satisfactory. The project developed strong partnerships, especially with local stakeholders. Stakeholders' understanding of the project's aims was generally high, with the exception of local communities.

178. E6. Communications, knowledge management and knowledge products: Satisfactory. The project met its targets for communications and knowledge products. Communications has been generally effective.

179. E7. Overall quality of M&E: Moderately satisfactory.

180. E7.1 M&E design: Moderately satisfactory. The M&E plan in the project document was practical and sufficient, although the project's results matrix was large and confusing. There were no gender-disaggregated targets or other reporting requirements.

181. E7.2 M&E implementation plan: Satisfactory. The project closely followed the M&E plan, with minor shortcomings in clear reporting against indicators and targets in the results matrix.

182. E8. Overall assessment of factors affecting performance: Satisfactory.

3.6 Cross-cutting concerns

3.6.1 Gender

Finding 37. The project design contained no actions or reporting that addressed gender issues, and implementation and reporting only had limited consideration of gender participation. A gender mainstreaming plan was not developed until the mid-term evaluation had been completed in 2021, which was too late to significantly influence implementation (Evaluation Question 7.1).

183. This GEF-5 project did not undertake a gender analysis, as this was not required at the time, and did not include any specific actions that addressed gender issues. There was no consideration of gender in the M&E plan or results matrix.

184. Project implementation gave some consideration to gender participation in planning and reporting activities, including encouraging women to participate in activities. Some gender-disaggregated reporting was provided for training and participation.

185. The mid-term evaluation noted that the project "lacked implementation and reporting focus on cross cutting areas including Gender, Environmental Safeguards" and recommended that a gender specialist be engaged to undertake an assessment so that a gender mainstreaming plan could be developed and prioritized (FAO, 2020, p. 42).

186. In response to this recommendation, a gender mainstreaming plan was developed. However, this was not finished until 2021 and had limited time to influence project implementation. Development of this plan was supported by the CTA rather than engaging a gender specialist.

3.6.2 Minority groups, including indigenous, disadvantaged, vulnerable, disabled, and young people

Finding 38. Although the project design did not take into consideration minority groups, engagement with the community, delivered largely through NGOs, adopted a human rights-based approach by respecting the rights and customs of the local people. Extensive activities were also undertaken with school students.

187. The project design did not consider minority groups. Nevertheless, engagement with the community, much of which was delivered through NGOs, adopted a human rights-based approach by respecting the rights and customs of the local people.

188. The project also implemented extensive educational activities with school students.

189. There are no ethnic minorities living in the project area.

3.6.3 Environmental and social safeguards

Finding 39. Project design and implementation did not address any environmental or social safeguards (Evaluation Question 6.1).

190. During the design of this GEF-5 project, the relevant processes were followed and the project was assessed as being unlikely to have adverse environmental or social impacts. Therefore, no associated actions or safeguards were included in the design. This assessment was not reconsidered during implementation. Given the long period of project implementation, the significant social and political changes since the project design between 2011 and 2013, and the significant evolution in expectations for social and

environmental safeguards in GEF projects since then, it would have been preferable for this assessment to have been repeated during implementation.

3.6.4 Ratings for cross-cutting concerns

191. F1. Gender and other equity dimensions: Moderately unsatisfactory. The design included no gender-specific actions or reporting. Consideration of gender was limited during implementation. A gender mainstreaming plan was developed, but it was too late for it to influence implementation.

192. F2. Human rights issues/indigenous peoples: Moderately satisfactory. The project design did not consider minority groups, and there are no ethnic minorities in the project area. Engagement with the community adopted a human rights-based approach.

193. F3. Environmental and social safeguards: Moderately satisfactory. There were no relevant actions or safeguards in the project because it was assessed during design as being unlikely to have adverse environmental or social impacts.

3.7 Overall project rating

194. Overall project rating: Satisfactory. This is calculated using the GEF protocol based on relevance, effectiveness and efficiency.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

4.1 Conclusions

Conclusion 1. The project was highly relevant to national conservation priorities and relevant to FAO and the GEF strategic priorities. It was also relevant to community beneficiary needs, although this aspect of the project design and funding was relatively weak.

195. During implementation the project has become increasingly more relevant to national priorities, as the People's Republic of China commits strongly to the development of ecological civilization and protected area reform.

Conclusion 2. The project achieved most of its outcomes and targets, which is highly commendable because it experienced major delays early on and was significantly behind schedule at the time of the mid-term evaluation.

196. The project made a significant contribution to the creation of an integrated approach to the conservation and management of forest biodiversity in Huangshan Municipality (Outcome 1); an excellent contribution to greater management efficiency in the 12 nature reserves and improved the status of these protected areas (Outcome 2); a good contribution to increased institutional capacity and public and political support for the conservation of biodiversity in the forest ecosystems of the People's Republic of China (Outcome 3); and implemented satisfactory documentation of good practices. However, there is little evidence that good practices and lessons learned from the project are being taken up and replicated elsewhere in the non-participating nature reserves, especially in Tier 4 nature reserves (Outcome 4.1).

197. Part of the reason that the project made limited progress with Tier 4 nature reserves adopting good practices is that this part of the project was poorly designed and largely unrealistic. Also, as explained under Finding 6, the municipality has recently integrated the Tier 4 nature reserves into a smaller number of reserves with new management structures and responsibilities. The future management, capacity building and good practices adoption for these areas will have to consider the new arrangements in place for the consolidated reserves.

Conclusion 3. The project was extended from five years to eight years. This was mainly due to a two-year delay in initial funds, poor relationships and low levels of trust during the first four years, and COVID-19 challenges. Project efficiency has been turned around by various factors, especially improved FAO oversight and capacity since 2018 and the implementation of strong recommendations from the mid-term evaluation in 2019.

Conclusion 4. Most of the project's interventions were well targeted on measures that will continue beyond the life of the project, and ownership is strong. Therefore many results are likely to continue after project completion. There are risks to sustainability from the lack of progress with the 60 Tier 4 nature reserves and the lack of a strategy for sustaining and scaling up the work with communities on alternative livelihoods.

198. The sustainability of results will benefit from investments in mainstreaming biodiversity into planning and policies; building capacity; preparing nature reserve management plans; disseminating good practices; building the nature reserve network and website; and strong partnerships.

199. The sustainability strategy that is being developed should address challenges with sustainability and the scaling up of practices for Tier 4 nature reserves, and the work on alternative livelihoods.

Conclusion 5. The materialized cofinancing exceeded the committed cofinancing. The contribution of Huangshan Municipality to the project's achievements was very significant, and the partnership with NGOs was innovative and added great value.

Conclusion 6. The project design and implementation had limited consideration of gender and other cross-cutting issues.

200. The design of this GEF-5 project had very little consideration of gender, minority groups, or social and environmental risks. Implementation included some consideration of gender participation and provided limited reporting on this. A gender mainstreaming plan was developed in 2021, but this was too late to have a substantial impact on project implementation.

4.2 Recommendations

201. As explained under Finding 6, the following recommendations include references to Tier 3 and Tier 4 nature reserves, despite the recent integration and adjustment of boundaries of some of these reserves. This is to show clear alignment of findings and recommendations with the project as designed and implemented. It will be necessary for the PMO and the Huangshan Municipal Forestry Bureau to consider the tiers that nature reserves were assigned to during this project when considering the findings, especially Recommendations 2 and 3.

202. The suggested responsibility is provided in parentheses after each recommendation (see the list of Abbreviations).

Recommendation 1. The sustainability plan that has been started should be finalized. It should include careful attention to disseminating good practices; supporting Tier 3 and 4 nature reserves to improve management; sustaining and scaling up community co-management and alternative livelihood activities; and learning from the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui management model in the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve (PMO, HSAC).

203. Although many results of the project are likely to be sustainable, the evaluation identified two areas in which there was a low likelihood of results being sustained and scaled up: working with Tier 3 and 4 nature reserves to improve their management practices, and working with the community on co-management and alternative livelihoods.

204. A sustainability plan is being developed and this should be finalized, with the inclusion of sustainability and scaling up approaches to these aspects.

205. It would also be beneficial to include a consideration of opportunities to learn from the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui entrusted management model in the sustainability plan.

Recommendation 2. For Tier 3 nature reserves, continue providing support to improve their management effectiveness, using the learnings and good practices from this project (Huangshan Municipal Forestry Bureau).

206. Tier 3 nature reserves received some support from the project, but there is little evidence of actual improvements in management – partly because the project design did not identify a means of verification for these nature reserves. It is recommended that good practices and capacity development continue to be provided to Tier 3 nature reserves.

Recommendation 3. For Tier 4 nature reserves, promote the adaptation of the community co-management approach and the Forest Chief Policy to develop a new model that empowers the community to manage the nature reserves and their natural resources (Huangshan Municipal Forestry Bureau).

207. There has been little progress in improving management for the 60 Tier 4 nature reserves. This is partly because it was unrealistic that good practices from the Huangshan Scenic Nature Reserve would be easily transferable to nature reserves with very different features, visitation levels, facilities, management and biodiversity values. Also, as with the Tier 3 nature reserves, the project design did not identify a means of verification for the adoption of good practices by the Tier 4 nature reserves.

208. A recommended alternative to improving management of the Tier 4 nature reserves is to promote the adaptation of the community co-management approach and the Forest Chief Policy. This would develop a new model that empowers the community to manage the protected areas and their natural resources.

Recommendation 4. Assess the effectiveness of the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui entrusted management model in the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve. If appropriate, explore opportunities to scale up and apply to other communities, forest areas and nature reserves with suitable conditions (PMO, Huangshan Municipal Forestry Bureau).

209. The entrusted management model being implemented by the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui is leading to further Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve management activities with funds that are additional to core nature reserve funding. This is creating improved outcomes in the provincial nature reserve, including patrolling, monitoring and management of other threats. At the same time, the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui are working with communities surrounding the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve, developing CCCs, implementing alternative livelihood activities, monitoring and managing their community protected areas, and building a corridor between reserves.

210. This is a promising new model that has been functioning for four years. It is recommended that its success and effectiveness be monitored and, if appropriate, that opportunities are explored to scale up and apply to other communities, forest areas and nature reserves with suitable conditions.

211. This may include workshops and study tours to assess and learn from the Jiulongfeng model.

Recommendation 5. In future projects using an indirect execution modality, provide enhanced capacity building in the development of agreements and the implementation of required reporting and financial procedures (OPIM team at FAO).

212. Clear benefits from the pre-OPIM modality were identified, although capacity and human resources were not adequate for the negotiation of agreements and implementation. For projects with a municipal agency as an operational partner, it is likely to be easier to

negotiate and implement under OPIM if there is a dedicated municipal government agency that is responsible for international projects.

Recommendation 6. Assess the future needs in Huangshan Municipality for expert advice on biodiversity-related matters after project closure. Consider rationalizing the Project Leading Group, the Biodiversity Conservation Committee, and the BAC (PMO, Huangshan Municipal Forestry Bureau).

213. The establishment of permanent biodiversity committees in Huangshan Municipality is an excellent project outcome and it should continue. When the GEF project is completed, it may no longer be necessary to have so many committees, or their roles may need clarifying.

Recommendation 7. In future FAO-GEF projects, if a project has a strong policy focus, then the operational partner should be a provincial bureau. This could be a provincial grassland and forestry bureau (FAO, national partners).

214. HSAC, a municipal government agency, was a successful operational partner for this project because of its management role. Various activities with the nature reserves were consistent with this role. However, this municipal bureau does not have a significant policy role. Therefore policy-focused projects would be less likely to be successful if a municipal bureau were to lead. Provincial bureaus are likely to be a more suitable executing partner for policy-focused projects.

Recommendation 8. Consider opportunities to promote the achievements, good practices and innovations of this project at the United Nations Biodiversity Conference (CBD COP 15) in Montreal, Canada in December 2022 (PMO, HSAC).

215. Opportunities should be considered to promote the significant achievements, good practices and innovations of this project. This may include a partnership with the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui at the United Nations Biodiversity Conference (CBD COP 15) in December 2022.

Recommendation 9. Explore opportunities to disseminate the achievements, good practices and innovations of this project internationally, including the preparation of materials in languages other than Chinese, if necessary (HSAC, FAO).

216. This project has many notable achievements and innovations and has undertaken work to document good practices. The partnership with the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui on innovative protected area financing, management and sustainable livelihoods development will be of considerable interest outside of the People's Republic of China. It is recommended that opportunities are developed to promote these internationally, which may involve preparing case studies and other promotional materials in languages other than Chinese.

5. Lessons learned

Lesson 1. Indirect execution can build government ownership and capacity, and lead to the increased likelihood of sustainable results. However, the agreements must be clear about respective roles and responsibilities in quality assurance activities and technical support. The negotiation of agreements and implementation of the modality should be supported by an investment in capacity building and human resources in the operational partner (Evaluation Question 5.8).

217. Although this project was implemented under a pre-OPIM modality, there are lessons that can be learned for implementation under OPIM and indirect execution generally.

218. Clear benefits were identified from the pre-OPIM modality, especially increased government ownership and capacity, leading to the increased likelihood of sustainable results.

219. The project was one of five FAO-GEF projects in the People's Republic of China to adopt an indirect execution modality early in the process. This was an anticipatory exploration of national implementation and occurred before the OPIM was operational. It was, therefore, a learning experience for Chinese agencies and for FAO. HSAC, in particular, had very little experience negotiating such matters, and there was no dedicated municipal government agency responsible for international projects. In the absence of corporate guidance (later issued in the form of MS701/OPIM), negotiating an agreement that adequately covered all the requirements of indirect execution was very challenging, and early errors were made that required protracted renegotiations and led to major project delays. Among other challenges and shortcomings that arose, there were reports of poor relationships and a lack of trust between the PMO and FAO (as described in the mid-term evaluation). Importantly, these relationships are now largely repaired.

220. A general lesson from this is that it can take a long time for project parties to develop an agreed understanding of joint responsibilities and to develop trusting, productive relationships. In this project, such a process had commenced upon project launch and took several years. This had a major impact on the project's ability to deliver its objective and outcomes within the five-year period. This difficulty would be greatly improved by the implementation modality being clearly identified during the project design phase, ensuring that shared understanding and relationships are built from the earliest stage possible.

221. It is necessary that the negotiation of agreements for indirect execution, such as operational partner agreements, are clear about respective roles and responsibilities, especially in quality assurance activities and technical support.

222. In addition, there were shortcomings in capacity and human resources in the operational partner for the negotiation of agreements and the implementation of procedures and protocols to meet the requirements of the execution agreement. It is important to recognize this and invest in capacity building and human resources within the operational partner.

223. FAO China now has extensive experience with indirect execution from these five pre-OPIM projects and many subsequent OPIM projects. It would be valuable for them to share their experiences and lessons learned with other FAO country offices. This could also help to build the capacity of operational partners.

Lesson 2. It is important that the FAO and GEF profile is maintained when components of a project are outsourced and during other partnerships as part of projects.

224. The Evaluation Team found during interviews with village beneficiaries that the profile of FAO and the GEF and an understanding of the aims of the project were low. This is partly because these parts of the project have been implemented in partnership with the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui, which have a high profile and are often "the face" of the project among communities. Also, some activities were outsourced to Green Anhui by the project. The mid-term evaluation had a similar observation at Jiulongfeng, noting "the lack of visibility of the GEF and FAO logos on these endeavours" (FAO, 2020, p. 24). This holds true, even though the terminal Evaluation Team was advised that adjustments had since been made to meet the requirement for the title of FAO and the GEF logo to appear in all project-supported activities and products. Requirements and expectations around FAO and GEF visibility, including the use of titles and logos, should be made clear to partners and subcontractors, and be specified in contracts if necessary.

Lesson 3. It is important that projects address early on how each indicator and target will be measured and reported against, and how success will be measured.

225. With 38 indicators and confusing relationships between outcomes and outputs, the results matrix for this project was difficult to report against. For many indicators and targets, the reporting in project implementation reviews and the self-assessment report did not directly address the indicator or target. Therefore, it was not straightforward for this terminal evaluation to assess project achievements. Projects should define early on how each indicator will be measured and reported against, and how success will be assessed.

Lesson 4. Comprehensive and concise reporting against each target should be prepared in a timely manner for both mid-term evaluations and terminal evaluations.

226. The Evaluation Team received the self-assessment report soon after commencing this terminal evaluation. This augmented other reporting, especially the project inception reports and PPRs. In the self-assessment, reporting against many of the indicators in the results matrix was incomplete or did not sufficiently address the wording of the indicator or target. Evidence of achievements was gradually accumulated during the evaluation using a diverse range of sources. For future projects, it is important that projects agree early on how each indicator and target will be measured and verified and that evidence is gathered in a timely manner before commencement of the mid-term evaluation and terminal evaluation.

Lesson 5. Planning for sustainability and the scaling up of project results should commence early and continue through the project rather than being completed at the end of the project.

227. A sustainability plan is in preparation but a draft is not yet available. Sustainability and scaling up should be considered throughout projects so that interventions are planned, implemented and monitored with specific consideration of how they will be sustained or scaled up.

Lesson 6. Additional planning that is done during implementation of a project to inform and improve ongoing delivery, such as a gender mainstreaming plan, must be completed with sufficient time to effectively influence project activities and outcomes.

228. In response to a recommendation of the mid-term evaluation, a gender mainstreaming plan was developed during project implementation. Despite the mid-term evaluation being

completed in May 2019, the gender mainstreaming plan was not finished until 2021 and had limited time to influence project implementation.

Lesson 7. To enhance the likelihood that government cofinancing materializes and substantively and sustainably contributes to project outcomes, it is important that project design and implementation are strongly anchored in the priorities and needs of the relevant government agencies.

229. This project was successful in the materialization of government cofinancing, especially from the municipal government, to make substantive contributions that are likely to continue after the project ends. Important factors in this success are that the project design and implementation were strongly anchored in the priorities and needs of the relevant government agencies. This was particularly demonstrated during the first two years when government cofinancing kept the project running and delivering initial outputs.

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Appendix 1. People interviewed

Last name	First name	Position	Organization	Location
Braun	Genevieve	Programme officer	FAO-GEF Coordination Unit	Rome
Chen	Longfei	Director	Wuxishan Provincial Nature Reserve	Yi County
Chen	Zhen	Head	Rice and Shrimp Cooperative, Jiaocun village	Huangshan City
Chen	Shuifei	Associate researcher	Nanjing Institute of Environmental Sciences, Ministry of Ecology and Environment	Nanjing City
Chen	Hancheng	Village committee	Shangling village	Huangshan City
Cheng	Jun	BAC member	Forestry Bureau of Huangshan Municipality	Huangshan City
Dai	Jiwang	Homestay owner	Shangling village	Huangshan City
Dai	Xiaohui	Homestay owner	Shangling village	Huangshan City
Ding	Yongzhong	Finance book management	Accountant, PMO	Huangshan City
Du	Minghui	Deputy general manager	Qianniao Valley Company	Huangshan City
Fang	Jie	Professor	Life Sciences College of Anhui University	Hefei City
Guo	Ke	Project daily management	Manager, PMO	Huangshan City
Han	Shenghua	Vice party secretary	Datong village	Huangshan City
Hofer	Thomas	Former lead technical officer	FAO headquarters	Rome
Hu	Chaqing	Director	Lingnan Provincial Nature Reserve	Xiuning County
Hu	Jiangling	Manager	Fuling Science and Technology Co., Ltd	Huangshan City
Huang	Liqun	Former deputy director, consultant	PMO	Huangshan City
Jiang	Jianhuang	First CTA	PMO	Huangshan City
Leng	Fei	Second CTA	PMO	Beijing City
Luo	Jiaojing	Staff	Huangshan District Green Anhui Nature	Huangshan City

Last name	First name	Position	Organization	Location
			Conservation Centre (Green Anhui)	
Lv	Shunqing	Professor	Huangshan College	Huangshan City
Morici	Gianmarco	OPIM specialist	FAO headquarters	Rome
Naito	Yurie	Financial liaison officer	FAO headquarters	Rome
Salas Casasola	Ina	Consultant	FAO-GEF Coordination Unit	Rome
She	Hongyuan	PSC member, deputy director	HSAC Gardening and Forestry Bureau	Huangshan City
Tang	Xinsheng	Consultant on biodiversity and protected area system policies	Huangshan College	Huangshan City
Wang	Huiming	Party secretary	Datong village	Huangshan City
Wang	Qingshan	Director	Qingliangfeng Nationial Nature Reserve	She County
Watson	Carlos	Representative/budget holder	FAO China	Beijing City
Wertz	Sheila	Lead technical officer	FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific	Bangkok
Wu	Feng	BAC member, deputy director	HSAC Gardening and Forestry Bureau	Huangshan City
Wu	Qide	Director	Tianhushan Provincial Nature Reserve	Huangshan City
Yang	Xinhu	PSC chairperson	HSAC deputy director	Huangshan City
Yin	Xing	Manager	Anhui Meitu Company	Hefei City
Ye	Nianchang	Manager	Hefei Luyang District Deep Blue Environmental Protection Action Centre	Hefei City
Zhang	Chen	Third CTA	PMO	Changsha City
Zhao	Wei	Portfolio manager	FAO China	Beijing City
Zhou	Xiang	Director	Huangshan District Green Anhui Nature Conservation Centre	Huangshan City
Zhu	Liangcheng	Ranger	Datong	Huangshan City

Last name	First name	Position	Organization	Location
Zhu	Yongsheng,	Head of patrolling team	Datong village	Huangshan City
Zhu	Zhongyong	Ranger	Datong village	Huangshan City
Zou	Qingsong	Staff	Huangshan District Green Anhui Nature Conservation Centre	Huangshan City

Appendix 2. GEF evaluation criteria rating table

GEF criteria/subcriteria	Rating[2]	Summary comments
A. STRATEGIC RELEVANCE		
A1. Overall strategic relevance	S	
A1.1. Alignment with FAO and the GEF strategic priorities	S	The project aligned with FAO and the GEF strategic priorities at the time of design and at completion.
A1.2. Relevance to national, regional and global priorities, and beneficiary needs	S	The project was highly relevant to national, regional and global priorities, despite shortcomings in the design for meeting beneficiary needs.
A1.3. Complementarity with existing interventions	S	The project design was based on learnings from other GEF projects, particularly the component on Improving Management of Nature Reserves in Guangxi.
B. EFFECTIVENESS		
B1. Overall assessment of project results	S	
B1.1. Delivery of project outputs	S	The project delivered most outputs and met most associated indicators.
B1.2. Progress towards project objective	MS	The project made good general progress towards the objective, but there was limited progress towards good practices being adopted by Tier 4 nature reserves.
- Outcome 1	S	The project made a significant contribution to the creation of an integrated approach to the conservation and management of forest biodiversity in Huangshan Municipality.
- Outcome 2	S	The project made an excellent contribution to greater management efficiency in the 12 nature reserves and improved the status of these protected areas.
- Outcome 3	S	The project made a good contribution to increased institutional capacity and public and political support for the conservation of biodiversity in the forest ecosystems of the People's Republic of China.
- Outcome 4	MS	There was satisfactory documentation of good practices. However, there is little evidence that good practices and lessons learned from the project are being taken up and replicated elsewhere in the non-participating nature reserves, especially Tier 4 nature reserves.
- Overall rating of progress towards achieving objectives/outcomes	S	
B1.3. Likelihood of impact	S	The project's investments in mainstreaming biodiversity into planning and policies; building capacity; preparing nature reserve management plans; disseminating good practices; building the nature reserve network and website; and establishing strong partnerships mean that impacts are likely.
C. EFFICIENCY		
C1. Efficiency	MS	After a very slow start, implementation efficiency has improved significantly since 2018 and has been

[2] See rating scheme in Appendix 3.

GEF criteria/subcriteria	Rating[2]	Summary comments
		especially high since the mid-term evaluation. The project was cost-effective.
D. SUSTAINABILITY OF PROJECT OUTCOMES		
D1. Overall likelihood of risks to sustainability	ML	The project's interventions have been well targeted to build institutional and individual capacity and capability (including within villages), mainstream biodiversity, and facilitate information sharing. There are risks to sustainability and scaling up for the improved management of Tier 4 nature reserves and alternative livelihood activities.
D1.1. Financial risks	ML	There is regular municipal funding, but it is not sufficient for all nature reserves in the municipality. Opportunities could be considered to extend the entrusted management model with the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui.
D1.2. Sociopolitical risks	L	The project is very consistent with national priorities and therefore has strong support at all levels of government. The project's alternative livelihood activities are supported by the communities surrounding nature reserves. There is some risk if communities feel the support will not continue.
D1.3. Institutional and governance risks	L	The project improved institutional arrangements, including the establishment of permanent biodiversity committees and greater institutional and individual capacity. There are no significant institutional and governance risks.
D1.4. Environmental risks	L	There are no significant environmental risks to the sustainability of project results. The measures put in place should assist managers in addressing climate change impacts.
D2. Catalysis and replication	MS	Some relevant measures are in place. However, catalysis and replication for Tier 3 and 4 sites and the alternative livelihoods work are not strong and should be addressed in the project sustainability plan.
E. FACTORS AFFECTING PERFORMANCE		
E1. Project design and readiness	MU	The project was developed in consideration of national priorities and local needs, and included important initiatives. However, there were flaws in the causal logic.
E2. **Quality of project implementation**	MS	
E2.1. Quality of project implementation by FAO (budget holder, lead technical officer, Project Task Force, etc.)	MS	FAO implementation had been weak until 2018. Relationships with HSAC and the PMO were weak. However, implementation has been strong since then.
E2.1. Project oversight (PSC, project working group, etc.)	MS	Project oversight had been weak until 2018 but has been strong since then.
E3. **Quality of project execution** by HSAC, the executing agency	S	HSAC effectively discharged its role and responsibilities related to the management and administration of the project.
E4. Financial management and cofinancing	HS	Materialized cofinancing exceeded committed financing at CEO endorsement and was a real component of the project.

GEF criteria/subcriteria	Rating[2]	Summary comments
E5. Project partnerships and stakeholder engagement	MS	Strong partnerships developed, especially with local stakeholders. Stakeholders' understanding of the project's aims was generally high, with the exception of local communities.
E6. Communications, knowledge management and knowledge products	S	Targets for communications and knowledge products met. Communications has been generally effective.
E7. **Overall quality of M&E**	MS	
E7.1. M&E design	MS	The M&E plan in the project document was practical and sufficient, although the results matrix was large and confusing. There were no gender-disaggregated targets or other reporting requirements.
E7.2. M&E implementation plan (including financial and human resources)	S	The project closely followed the M&E plan, with minor shortcomings in clear reporting against indicators and targets in the results matrix.
E8. Overall assessment of factors affecting performance	S	
F. CROSS-CUTTING CONCERNS		
F1. Gender and other equity dimensions	MU	The design included no gender-specific actions or reporting. Consideration of gender was limited during implementation. A gender mainstreaming plan developed, but it was too late for it to influence implementation.
F2. Human rights issues/indigenous peoples	MS	The project design did not consider minority groups, and there are no ethnic minorities in the project area. Engagement with the community adopted a human rights-based approach.
F3. Environmental and social safeguards	MS	There were no relevant actions or safeguards in the project because it was assessed during design as being unlikely to have adverse environmental or social impacts.
Overall project rating	**S**	

Appendix 3. Rating scheme

PROJECT RESULTS AND OUTCOMES

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

Rating	***Description***
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 assessing 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 as per the revised results framework, where appropriate, a lower outcome effectiveness rating may be given.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION AND EXECUTION

Quality of implementation and of execution will be rated separately. Quality of implementation pertains to the role and responsibilities discharged by the GEF agencies that have direct access to GEF resources. Quality of execution pertains to the roles and responsibilities discharged 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:

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

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Quality of project M&E will be assessed in terms of:

i. design

ii. implementation

SUSTAINABILITY

The sustainability will be assessed taking into account the risks related to 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:

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

Appendix 4. GEF cofinancing table

Materialized cofinancing is given in USD, converted from CNY using the exchange rate of 6.4843. During the drafting of this report, data was not yet available for the local village producers or FAO.

Name of the cofinancer	**Cofinancer type**	**Type of cofinancing**	**Cofinancing at project start** amount confirmed at the GEF CEO endorsement/approval by the project design team (in USD)			**Materialized cofinancing at project mid-term** (in USD)		
			In-kind	**Cash**	**Total**	**In-kind**	**Cash**	**Total**
HSAC	Municipal government	Cash		5 473 612	5 473 612		7 937 960	7 937 960
Yixian County Bureau of Forestry	County government	In-kind	88 200		88 200	98 700		98 700
Huangshan Municipal Bureau of Finance	Municipal government	Cash		3 900 000	3 900 000		8 080 123	8 080 123
Huangshan Tourism Development Authority	Government tourism company	Cash		372 000	372 000			
Local village producers*	Beneficiaries	In-kind	436 500		436 500	124 546		124 546
Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui	NGOs	Cash					1 725 981	1 725 981
FAO		In-kind	237 900		237 900	326 787		326 787
Grand total (in USD)			762 600	9 745 612	10 508 212	550 033	17 744 064	18 294 097

Note: * Shanchacun Village of Tangkou Town, Fucun Village of Gengcheng Town, Chengcun Village of Jiaocun Town, Shanglingcun Village of Jiaocun Town, Lianguangcun Village of Hongxing Town

Appendix 5. Results matrix showing achievements

Outcome/ output	Indicator	Baseline	End-of-project target	Achievement at mid-term evaluation	Achievement at project end	Evaluation team comment
Objective: To secure the effective conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in the mountainous forest ecosystems of Huangshan Municipality						
Component 1: Policy, planning and institutional arrangements						
Outcome 1 achievement rating: SATISFACTORY						
Outcome 1.1	Number of large-scale plans that incorporate biodiversity as a planning priority	Biodiversity not described as a planning priority in Municipal 12th 5-Year Social and Economic Development Plan	Biodiversity conservation identified as a priority in the Municipal 13th 5-Year Social and Economic Development Plan	100 percent Biodiversity conservation has been well integrated into 13th Five-Year Development Plan for Huangshan National Scenic Reserve, which also depicted the GEF/FAO-GEF 049 programme. Biodiversity conservation is already integrated into the 13th Five-Year Development Plan for Huangshan Municipality.	Target achieved Biodiversity conservation identified as a priority in both the 13th and 14th Municipal 5-Year Social and Economic Development Plans, released in 2016 and 2021, respectively. Additional large-scale plan contributing to this target: Planning of Xin'an River Ecological Economic Demonstration Zone (2018)	Verified by document review
Output 1.1.1	Policies adopted for: (i) the conservation of biodiversity; (ii) the establishment of a municipal nature reserve system; and (iii) the management of alien species in Huangshan Municipality.	There exist national policies for nature reserves and alien species, but no provincial or local policies.	Three policies	100 percent Three municipal policies formulated/reviewed: i) Guidelines on Huangshan Municipal Biodiversity Conservation Management; ii) Implementation Plan for Huangshan Municipal Nature Reserve Conservation Management; and	Target achieved Four relevant policies adopted: i) Guidelines of Biodiversity Conservation in Huangshan Municipality; ii) Implementation Plan for Nature Reserve Conservation in Huangshan Municipality; iii) Implementation Opinions for Management and Control	Verified by document review

Outcome/ output	Indicator	Baseline	End-of-project target	Achievement at mid-term evaluation	Achievement at project end	Evaluation team comment
				iii) Implementation Guidance on Huangshan Municipal Alien Species Management and Prevention and Control.	of Alien Species in Huangshan Municipality; and iv) Investigation and Evaluation of the Current Situation of Nature Reserves in Huangshan City and Recommendations by Yang Guangdao, Anhui Provincial Forestry Inventory Institute.	
Output 1.1.2	Two draft policies addressing specific biodiversity conservation issues	Absence of local, provincial policies on protected area financing wildlife damage compensation	Two draft policies	0 percent It is planned to start in 2019. The PMO is not able to identify pending policy issues and gaps and thus seeks support from FAO-GEF.	Achieved The Huangshan District issued Forest Operation Plan Regarding 'One Forest, One Policy' in Huangshan District 2018–2025 in August 2019. The Huangshan municipal government office issued the Implementation Plan for the Establishment of the Forest Chief Reform Demonstration Zone in Huangshan City in 2019.	Verified by document review The identified policies make specific contributions to biodiversity conservation and forest management in Huangshan Municipality, and the target is considered achieved.
Output 1.1.3	Three long-term plans to guide the implementation of the two project-supported policies (i and ii of Output 1.1.1) and a municipal forest ecotourism master plan developed	The contract has been awarded to Anhui University to formulate a forest ecotourism master plan.	Three long-term plans	100 percent Strategic Plan for Huangshan Municipal Biodiversity Sustainable Management Master Plan for Huangshan Municipal Forest Tourism by the Huangshan Municipal Tourism Commission	Achieved Three long-term plans: i) Strategic Plan of Management for Biodiversity Sustainability in Huangshan Municipality;	Verified by document review and interviews The identified plans have been adopted and are under implementation.

Outcome/ output	Indicator	Baseline	End-of-project target	Achievement at mid-term evaluation	Achievement at project end	Evaluation team comment
	and under initial implementation			Investigation, assessment and recommendation for current status of the Huangshan Municipal Nature Reserve	ii) Huangshan Municipal Forest Ecotourism Master Plan; and iii) Plan of Xin'anjiang Ecological and Economic Demonstration Zone (2017–2025)	
Output 1.1.4	A permanent Biodiversity Coordination Committee functioning with regular meetings	No policy committee exists	One policy committee	100 percent Project Leading Group (city mayor as group leader and officials of relevant bureaus are members) established.	Achieved The Biodiversity Coordination Committee established and functioning well, with regular meetings. The mayor of the Huangshan Municipal government is director of the Biodiversity Coordination Committee.	The municipality also has a Project Leading Group, which has similar roles. It may be necessary to consolidate groups or clarify roles at the conclusion of the project.
Output 1.1.5	A permanent BAC (technical) functioning and providing technical support to the Biodiversity Coordination Committee	No technical advisory exists	One technical committee	100 percent The BAC comprised of seven members across sectors established in support of the Project Leading Group.	Achieved The BAC, established with members from across sectors and research institutions, is functioning well with regular panel meetings.	As noted under Output 1.1.4, the committees and roles may need consolidating or clarifying at the conclusion of the project.
Component 2: Improved nature reserve management effectiveness and networks						
Outcome 2 achievement rating: SATISFACTORY						
Outcome 2.1a	Biodiversity tracking tool score for management	Average management efficiency in 12 project-supported nature reserves	Average management efficiency in 12 project-supported nature reserves	100 percent Evidence shows that the tracking tool score for the management efficiency of	Achieved The terminal Biodiversity O1 tracking tool scores for the 12 nature reserves showed	METT reports provided and verified

Outcome/ output	Indicator	Baseline	End-of-project target	Achievement at mid-term evaluation	Achievement at project end	Evaluation team comment
	efficiency of nature reserves	included in the municipal network of protected areas is 50 (measured with the Biodiversity O1 tracking tool).	included in the municipal network of protected areas increased by 22 percent (measured with the Biodiversity O1 tracking tool) is 65.	nature reserves has increased by 10 percent.	that average management efficiency increased from 47 percent to 73.3.	
	Number of ha of protected areas for which management efficiency is increased	Zero	Greater management efficiency across 67 496 ha (direct impact Tiers 1, 2 and 3) Indirect 35 504 ha Total: 103 000 ha	No reporting	Achieved Greater management efficiency over 103 000 ha Direct project impact: across 67 496 ha through project activities in Tier 1, 2, and 3 nature reserves Indirect impact: across 35 504 ha in Tier 4 nature reserves, mainly due to initiatives by Huangshan Municipality to improve protection of the 60 county nature reserves by including them within the strict management area of the Huangshan ecological red line Qimen County in Huangshan has aggregated 50 small nature reserves and improved their management	Evidence on the indirect impact: Report on the Summary of Forestry Work in Huangshan City in 2020 and the Work Plan for the 14th Five-Year Cycle and the Year of 2021, and Promotion Meeting of the Huangshan City's Forest Chief System to Further Strengthen the Construction of the Demonstration Zone These verify Huangshan Municipality's commitment to the improved protection of nature reserves. As noted under Outcome 4, there is limited evidence that Tier 4 nature reserves have adopted new approaches identified by the project. Training in these nature reserves has been limited. Therefore, the GEF

Outcome/ output	Indicator	Baseline	End-of-project target	Achievement at mid-term evaluation	Achievement at project end	Evaluation team comment
					under the Forest Chief System.	contribution to the indirect impact of this target is limited. Nevertheless, this target is considered achieved because Huangshan Municipality is a cofinancing partner.
	Number of ha of productive landscape into which biodiversity conservation practices and objectives are mainstreamed	Zero	46 614 ha agriculture/forest land 3 800 ha forest land (corridor) Total: 50 414 ha	No reporting	Achieved Biodiversity conservation mainstreamed into 84 500 ha 80 000 ha forest land Huangshan Municipality stipulated biodiversity protection in forest management through two documents: i) 'One Forest and One Policy' Forest Management Planning Scheme for Huangshan District (2018–2025); and ii) Summary of Forestry Work in Huangshan City in 2020 and the Work Plan For the 14th Five-Year Cycle and the year 2021. 4 500 ha corridor built around the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve	The documents provided were verified as evidence and the target is considered achieved.
	Number of sectors into which	Zero	Three direct (forestry,	No reporting	Achieved	The documents provided were verified as evidence

Outcome/ output	Indicator	Baseline	End-of-project target	Achievement at mid-term evaluation	Achievement at project end	Evaluation team comment
	biodiversity conservation objectives are mainstreamed		ecotourism, agriculture) and three indirect (fisheries, water, transport)		Biodiversity mainstreamed into six 14th Five-Year sector plans: Forestry; Culture and Tourism; Agriculture and Rural Modernization; Aquaculture; Water Resources; Transportation Development	and the target is considered achieved.
Outcome 2.1b: Improvement in biodiversity species indicators	a) population of *Paa spinosa*	Population numbers of *Paa spinosa* found in 1 000 m transects in streams located in proximity to villages in six project-supported reserves is 17.	Population numbers *of Paa spinosa* (amphibian) found in 1 000 m transects in streams located in proximity to villages in six project-supported reserves is 26.	100 percent Respective surveys on four animal and four plant species are under way in parallel and will last a total of three years. Meanwhile, surveys to monitor indicative species (each for animal and plant) has also started. Results of these surveys show that the population of *Paa spinosa* found in 1 000 m transects reached 22, while bamboo species remain at 40, Chinese Yew and four plants (*Rhododendron maculiferum*, *Enkianthus chinensis*, *Baeothryon subcapitatum* and *Carex brevicuspis*) are NOT decreasing.	Achieved Population numbers of *Paa spinosa* in 1 000 m transects averaged 67 in 2021, exceeding the target of 26.	The *Paa spinosa* population showed a sharp increase in 2021. There are two likely contributing causes: 1) a national ban on the breeding and trade of wild animals for food purposes imposed after the outbreak of COVID-19; and 2) improved management of human impacts in the nature reserves, including through activities supported by the project.
	b) number of bamboo species in the Qingliangfeng Nature Reserve	Twenty-two bamboo species found in the Qingliangfeng Nature Reserve *(changed from 40)*	No change Twenty-two species recorded at project closure *(changed from 40)*		Partially achieved A survey in 2016 confirmed that 22 species were still present, but there has been no survey since then.	Considered partially achieved because the number of bamboo species was not monitored through the course of the project.

Outcome/ output	Indicator	Baseline	End-of-project target	Achievement at mid-term evaluation	Achievement at project end	Evaluation team comment
	c) numbers of Chinese Yew (*Taxus spp.*) in six project-supported nature reserves (Tier 1 and 2 project-supported nature reserves)	Baseline established in six villages: 22 Chinese Yew individuals	Population of Yew to be maintained over life of project		Achieved Annual monitoring from 2017 to 2019 confirmed that 22 Chinese yew individuals remain in the six villages.	Verified with data
	d) populations of four plant indicator species (*Rhododendron maculiferum*, *Quercus stewardii* Rehder, *Berberis anhweiensis* Ahrendt and *Cornus kousa* subsp.) in proximity to tourism visitation infrastructure in four project-supported reserves (Huangshan National Scenic Reserve, Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve, Tianhushan Provincial Nature Reserve and	Baseline and targets to be established in first semester of project implementation	Populations of four species to be maintained over life of project		Partially achieved Baseline monitoring for the four plant species was undertaken in 2021.	The target is considered partially achieved because the baselines for the four species were not established until year 7 of the project, and there is no time series monitoring available to assess the populations "over the life of the project" as per the target. Three of the four indicator plant species were changed because they were not considered suitable indicators for the unique flora of the Huangshan mountains. There was a long delay in changing the three indicator species, with the change not endorsed until 2021. The Evaluation Team heard that this delay was because technical information to justify the

Outcome/ output	Indicator	Baseline	End-of-project target	Achievement at mid-term evaluation	Achievement at project end	Evaluation team comment
	Lingnan Provincial Nature Reserve) *(Three of the four species were changed in 2021 from those in the project document.)*					change had not been prepared. A consequence of the delay is that the baseline monitoring was established late and the target was only partially achieved.
Output 2.1.1	Sector plan promoting the integration of biodiversity conservation as management objective integrated into the Huangshan National Scenic Reserve master management plan developed and under initial implementation	Master plan exists but it does not reflect biodiversity conservation as a management objective	One biodiversity conservation sector plan	100 percent Huangshan National Nature Reserve Biodiversity Conservation Strategy and Action Plan formulated by the contractor: China Environmental Planning Institute, Ministry of Ecology and Environment	Achieved The Huangshan Scenic Area Biodiversity Conservation Action Plan (2018–2030) was approved by the Huangshan Municipal People's Government in May 2019.	Verified by document review This was an important contribution. Until this plan was endorsed, there had been no dedicated plan for the Huangshan National Scenic Reserve that included biodiversity conservation as a management objective, despite the high biodiversity values.
Output 2.1.2	Management plans (two) and framework plans (three) for the remaining five project-supported nature reserves developed and under initial implementation	Two provincial-level management plans exist	Two management plans and three framework plans	90 percent Management Plan for Qingliangfeng National Nature Reserve Management Plan for Wuxishan Provincial Nature Reserve Management Plan Lingnan Provincial Nature Reserve	Achieved Three nature reserve administrative measures completed and issued by local county governments: Qingliangfeng, Lingnan and Wuxishan Nature Reserves. Five nature reserve management plans approved by local governments in	Verified by document reviews and interviews These were important contributions because they gave legal weight (through administrative measures) and a scientific planning process (management plans) to the nature reserves. All nature reserves interviewed

Outcome/ output	Indicator	Baseline	End-of-project target	Achievement at mid-term evaluation	Achievement at project end	Evaluation team comment
				(reviewed/released by county government) Tianhushan Nature Reserve Ecotourism Plan Up-gradation Plan for Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve (to be reviewed)	2018: Wuxishan, Tianhushan, Jiulongfeng, Qingliangfeng and Lingnan Nature Reserves	indicated that this was the most highly valued contribution of the project.
Output 2.1.3	a. three local CCCs to assist nature reserve staff in conserving local biodiversity resources *(changed from six after mid-term evaluation)*	No CCCs exist	Three CCCs *(changed from six after mid-term evaluation)*	70 percent Four CCCs established: three CCCs combined into the Jiulongfeng CCC and one CCC established in Wuxishan. The PMO argued to decrease six CCCs to five. The Paradise Foundation (a renowned Chinese NGO) is working with a community-based NGO, Green Anhui, and a social enterprise in the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve. Together, they have carried out many activities, including ranger team expansion, pushing forward connectivity and the formation of an ecological corridor between Huangshan and Jiulongfeng, ecoagricultural food production and marketing in support of local communities	Achieved Three CCCs were established in Shangling (2 300 ha), Datong (1 200 ha) and the Yanghu village (1 000 ha) community protected areas around the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve.	The formation of the CCCs and the associated agreements and activities were verified by the Evaluation Team through a document review, interviews and a site visit. The Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui were the main drivers of these activities, in association with their entrusted management of the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve. Some funds were from GEF funding, but most funding was from the Paradise Foundation (through Green Anhui). Some of the work, especially the CCCs and the patrolling, will continue after the GEF
	b. number of people benefiting from sustainable production activities in target villages	Zero	4 000		Achieved More than 5 000 residents from 410 households in communities adjacent to the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve benefited from alternative livelihood development, such as tea, local products, shrimp, rice and homestays. Community patrolling rangers were organized, and sustainable community employment was	

Outcome/ output	Indicator	Baseline	End-of-project target	Achievement at mid-term evaluation	Achievement at project end	Evaluation team comment
				livelihoods, nature education, homestay hostels, corporate volunteerism, etc. So far, 15 training workshops have been conducted and around 650 villagers (one-third women) have been trained to improve their skills in farming and cultivation. A brief factsheet is attached. Wild Monkey Valley is planning for another CCC.	provided by the protected areas and collectives.	project, funded by the Paradise Foundation.
Output 2.1.4	Computer-based nature reserve network for Huangshan nature reserves	None exist at present	One network	0 percent Not yet carried out	Achieved The Huangshan Biodiversity Database and Management System is set up and in use.	Verified by a live demonstration during an online interview The system has extensive functionality and appears user-friendly.
Output 2.1.5	3 800 ha of landscape supporting biodiversity conservation by insuring forest ecosystem connectivity between three nature reserves.	No biodiversity-friendly landscapes connecting nature reserves exist in Huangshan Municipality	One corridor (3 800 ha)	50 percent Connectivity covering about 2 000 ha achieved With the Jiulongfeng reserve having been planned and classified as core, buffer, experimental, community collective conservation area, and Alipay ant forest area, the corridor between Jiulongfeng and the Huangshan National Nature Reserve was actually built in	Achieved Approximately 4 500 ha of biodiversity-friendly corridor was built from the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve to the Yanghu Nature Reserve through the Shangling, Datong and Yanghu community protected area approach (see Output 2.1.3).	Verified by maps, photos and interviews

Outcome/ output	Indicator	Baseline	End-of-project target	Achievement at mid-term evaluation	Achievement at project end	Evaluation team comment
				connectivity accounting for 2 000 ha in landscape, while villagers already live outside and their livelihood being supported by the CCC, social enterprise and the Paradise Foundation with Alibaba's public-private partnership programme on carbon sequestration (ant forest) Further connectivity to Wuxishan will fulfil the indicator. However, 2 000 villagers in Wuxishan need resettlement. This has remained a huge difficulty for the PMO.		
Output 2.1.6	Competitive applied research grant programme to support science-based management decision-making in project-supported nature reserves	*Ad hoc* research with little relevance to better management decision-making for biodiversity conservation	15 research grants *(changed from 24 after the mid-term evaluation)*	100 percent Investigation and Risk Assessment of Alien Species in Huangshan Municipality reviewed Survey of eight species in progress for three consecutive years until 2020, conducted by the Ecology Faculty of Huangshan Academy Survey on Stony Frog and Chinese Yew in progress for three years until 2020 by the	Achieved 17 research grants issued Subjects included several species-specific studies, tea resources and insect species in Huangshan tea gardens; 3D digital modelling of *Pinus taiwanensis*; the relationship between humans and monkeys; and a survey of alien species and risk evaluation.	Verified by a list, some reports or summaries of results and during an interview The competitive process involved the PMO proposing topics and these being approved by the PSC; HSAC reviewing these and allocating funds to each; bids being invited; and HSAC approving grants.

Outcome/ output	Indicator	Baseline	End-of-project target	Achievement at mid-term evaluation	Achievement at project end	Evaluation team comment
				Ecology Faculty of Huangshan Academy Five new research subjects already identified by the PMO: watershed management; farming culture evolution; tea resources survey; ancient and precious tree; and human-monkey conflict.		
Output 2.1.7	Integrated monitoring programme among project-supported nature reserves operating and baseline established	Only *ad hoc*, species-specific monitoring done on a time limit basis	One integrated monitoring programme	100 percent Five major activities deployed and in progress: one big plot, two middle plots and ten small plots already established in the Huangshan National Nature Reserve by the Nanjing Environmental Science Institute and the Ministry of Ecology and Environment in collaboration with the Nanjing Forest University. Ecosystem monitoring of terrestrial vertebrates in the Huangshan National Scenic Reserve, jointly by the Nanjing Environmental Science Institute, the Ministry of Ecology and Environment and Anhui University	Achieved Integrated monitoring programme established Delivered in two phases: Phase 1 was a mid-term report of biodiversity survey and evaluation in the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve in November 2020, delivered by cofinancing. Phase 2 was an integrated monitoring programme, supported by GEF funds and completed in 2021. New species were found under this monitoring programme.	Verified through detailed presentations of monitoring design and protocols, reports and data, videos and photos, demonstrations and a site visit

Outcome/ output	Indicator	Baseline	End-of-project target	Achievement at mid-term evaluation	Achievement at project end	Evaluation team comment
				Forty infrared cameras set up in the Jiulongfeng reserve conducted by the provincial forest department Biological monitoring in the Jiulongfeng reserve conducted by the provincial forest department Infrared camera monitoring for wildlife conducted by the information department		
Component 3: Capacity building, environmental education and public awareness						
Outcome 3: SATISFACTORY						
Outcome 3.1	Number of schools that mainstream biodiversity modules into their curricula	Zero	Number of schools that mainstream biodiversity modules into their curricula	No reporting	Partially achieved Biodiversity was not formally mainstreamed into curricula. Extensive biodiversity-related activities were organized for ten schools (552 students, including 330 girls). Relevant educational materials were developed that will be available for use after project closure (see also Output 3.2.3). HSAC and Green Anhui organized lessons and courses for primary schools and secondary schools through cofinancing.	The extensive activities and materials were verified through interviews and demonstrations. The Evaluation Team was advised that it is very difficult to achieve changes to the curriculum. The indicator is considered partially achieved because the project implemented alternative approaches to try to achieve the results. It would have been beneficial if this indicator were changed during

Outcome/ output	Indicator	Baseline	End-of-project target	Achievement at mid-term evaluation	Achievement at project end	Evaluation team comment
						implementation to a more achievable target.
Outcome 3.2	Number of economic sector development plans that mainstream biodiversity	Mainline agency sector plans do not presently reflect biodiversity considerations	Two economic sector development plans incorporate biodiversity considerations in their respective 5-Year, 13th year plans	100 percent Completed Biodiversity conservation has been incorporated into the working plans of the tourism management sector and gardening department.	Achieved As reported under Outcome 2.1a, biodiversity mainstreamed into six 14th Five-Year sector plans: Forestry; Culture and Tourism; Agriculture and Rural Modernization; Aquaculture; Water Resources; and Transportation Development.	See Outcome 2.1a
Outcome 3.3	Number of visits to Huangshan nature reserves	8 000 visits to Huangshan nature reserves (excluding the Huangshan National Scenic Reserve)	Visitation increases to 80 000 visits to five project-supported Huangshan nature reserves	0 percent Data uncollected but estimated by the PMO as very attainable.	Achieved Visitation to the Lingnan Nature Reserve, the Wuxishan Nature Reserve and the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve exceeded 80 000 in 2020, 2021 and 2022.	Verified from visitation data available for three nature reserves. The type of data varied between nature reserves, but the summaries are: Lingnan: 67 623 in 2020; 69 723 in 2021; and 60 737 to June in 2022. Wuxishan: 17 003 in 2020; 2 079 in 2021; and 858 to June in 2022. Jiulongfeng: total 642 000 between 1 January 2018 and June 2022; averages to 142 667 per year 2018–2021; and 71 333 to June in 2022.

Outcome/ output	Indicator	Baseline	End-of-project target	Achievement at mid-term evaluation	Achievement at project end	Evaluation team comment
						The Evaluation Team considers the baseline in the results matrix of 8 000 visits to all Huangshan nature reserves (excluding the Huangshan National Scenic Reserve) to be questionable.
Output 3.1.1	Master training plan	No plan exists	One training plan	100 percent Master training plan with syllabus is completed by the Paradise Foundation and Green Anhui. To be reviewed	Achieved The Training Plan and Teaching Guideline for government officials, protected areas staff and community rangers was developed and implemented.	Verified by document review
Output 3.1.2	600 nature reserve staff, 280 government officials and 120 community leaders trained	No systematic training exists	Training of 600 nature reserve staff, 280 government officials and 120 community leaders	15 percent Forty nature reserve staff accepted the first aid training in May 2018, 650 villagers (one-third women but number of community leaders uncounted), and 40 nature reserve employees from Tiers 1 and 2, respectively, participated in 15 community-based skill trainings on farming/breeding and vocational first aid.	Achieved Training provided to: 660 nature reserve staff (achieved) 290 government officials (achieved) 1 100 community members (achieved) Total: 2 050 Also, training in biodiversity and conservation was provided to approximately 5 000 tourist guides as a "shortcut" to communicate to tourists. This training was conducted through	Verified by detailed records of training and discussions during interviews. The data provided indicated that, among the trainees, the proportion of women "exceeded 30 percent." This is comparable with the mid-term evaluation, which reported that "one-third" of villagers were women, showing that there was little change in gender participation in this aspect of the project.

Outcome/ output	Indicator	Baseline	End-of-project target	Achievement at mid-term evaluation	Achievement at project end	Evaluation team comment
					cofinancing by the Huangshan Tourism Company under HSAC.	
Output 3.2.1	Project public education plan	No plan	One public education plan	100 percent First drafts of the disseminative book Huangshan Biodiversity for tourists and of the Huangshan Biodiversity Manual for the general public have been completed. To be reviewed	Achieved A project public education plan was developed. In addition, environmental education readers for tourists and community residents were developed.	Verified by document review
Output 3.2.2	Biodiversity-based curricula applied in pilot primary (1) and secondary (1) schools	Curricula do not exist	One primary and one secondary school curricula	0 percent	Partially achieved See reporting under Outcome 3.1	
Output 3.2.3	Annual primary and secondary school readers compiling biodiversity-related material for the Huangshan school system	School readers do not exist	One primary and one secondary school readers	15 percent The subcontract for developing the readers has been signed.	Achieved Six readers were developed, addressing hydrology, geology, meteorology, animals, plants and birds, which may be used for primary and secondary school, as well as by college students. Specific readers for primary and secondary school were not developed. Various additional material provided as further evidence of activities under this output	Verified by document review and interview Additional material: - A set of nature education courses for primary and secondary school students, developed by the Forest Care company - A primary school curriculum with ten topics relating to Huangshan nature reserves

Outcome/ output	Indicator	Baseline	End-of-project target	Achievement at mid-term evaluation	Achievement at project end	Evaluation team comment
						- A course called Meaningfulness of Biodiversity for Grade 6 curriculum Given the range of materials produced that are suitable for primary and secondary schools students, the indicator is considered achieved.
Output 3.3.1	"World-class" biodiversity interpretation centre in the Huangshan National Scenic Reserve	1 200 m^2 biodiversity interpretative infrastructure exists but with no content	One centre	60 percent Geopark at the gate of the Huangshan National Scenic Reserve can serve as the centre in which there are already biodiversity-related education and communications materials. Biodiversity interpretation; "Marvellous Huangshan, Beautiful Homeland" developed, to be reviewed	Achieved A biodiversity exhibition area and a display venue at the Huangshan Geopark Museum were set up.	Verified by site visit
Output 3.3.2	80 km of trails in the Huangshan National Scenic Reserve posted with biodiversity conservation interpretive materials	80 km of trails exist but with technically outdated and degraded interpretive materials	80 km of trails posted with updated signage in support of biodiversity information	100 percent 571 billboards have been set up in the Huangshan National Scenic Reserve, with cofinancing amounting to CNY 7 million. However, FAO-GEF and GEF logos are NOT included.	Achieved 80 km of trails in the Huangshan National Scenic Reserve posted with biodiversity conservation interpretive materials was established by cofinancing from 2016 to 2017.	Verified by site visit and interviews

Outcome/ output	Indicator	Baseline	End-of-project target	Achievement at mid-term evaluation	Achievement at project end	Evaluation team comment
Component 4: Information dissemination and M&E						
Outcome 4: MODERATELY SATISFACTORY						
Outcome 4.1	Number of Tier 3 and 4 nature reserves adopting new approaches generated by the project	Huangshan's Tier 3 and 4 nature reserves have no CCCs, co-management plans and/or participation in network	Five Tier 3 and/or Tier 4 nature reserves adopt one or more of the new approaches generated by the project during life of project	0 percent The mid-term Evaluation Team helped the PMO identify several good practices and approaches that need documentation and scaling up.	Partially achieved There is little evidence of Tier 4 nature reserves adopting new approaches generated by the project. Good practices have been identified (see reporting under 4.1.2) and some training has been provided for Tier 3 and 4 nature reserves.	The Evaluation Team did not see any evidence that new approaches had been adopted by Tier 3 and 4 nature reserves. The project design was weak on how this indicator would be achieved and measured (e.g. the means of verification in the results matrix is simply "site visits"). The indicator is therefore considered partially achieved because the project put in place measures that were aimed at achieving the intended result. It would have been beneficial to identify earlier how this indicator would be measured and for data to have been collected for the terminal evaluation.
Output 4.1.1	Project webpage	No webpage currently exists	One webpage	Not yet carried out The Chinese government has decreased the number of official websites. The HSAC website has merged into the	Achieved One website established: ahhsgef.com	Verified by a live demonstration during an online interview and through subsequent visits to the website

Outcome/ output	Indicator	Baseline	End-of-project target	Achievement at mid-term evaluation	Achievement at project end	Evaluation team comment
				website of the municipality. It is not likely that the project website could be established.		The website is of high quality, with many pages and functionalities. It is connected to the HSAC website.
Output 4.1.2	Publication of project-related "good practices" on biodiversity conservation	No "good practices" exist	Five "good practices" publications	Not documented However, the mid-term Evaluation Team helped the PMO identify the following: the Jiulongfeng CCC and oublic-private partnership; rice–crayfish farming; homestays; tea; ecoproducts by social enterprise; the Tianhushan Provincial Nature Reserve under-forest economy; government-approved enterprise operation; Tianhushan ranger practices on monitoring species; Monkey Valley; wolf life conflict; tourism attraction; scientific research; and nature education for school students.	Achieved Seven good practices in three publications were published: - Five relating to the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve in the 2021 publication Cases of Chinese Social Organizations Participating in Biodiversity Conservation by China Environmental, one of a series of biodiversity books developed by the Ministry of Ecology and Environment that was disseminated during COP 15 in 2021. - One called Rotatory Closure of Huangshan Scenic Spots listed China's Implementation of the Fifth National Report of the Convention on the Protection of Biological Diversity as a model case. This was released globally by the United Nations	Verified by document review The five good practices from 2021 were: (1) the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve established a three-level access management system to monitor all aspects of the reserve in real time; (2) community participation in protection – management system of wild tea formulated together with the community; (3) the community protected area, the Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve, built a biodiversity-friendly corridor; (4) increased investment in protected areas; and (5) industrial assistance through commercial opportunities – farmers around the nature reserve received more income from tea sales, homestay tourism and other product sales.

Outcome/ output	Indicator	Baseline	End-of-project target	Achievement at mid-term evaluation	Achievement at project end	Evaluation team comment
					Environment Programme in 2014. - One called Huangshan International Joint Research Centre for Biodiversity and Behavioural Ecology of Short-tailed Monkeys, was published in Anhui Province's journal of international scientific and technological cooperation.	
Output 4.1.3	Peer-to peer consultative workshops for nature reserve staff	No peer-to-peer approaches used	Five peer-to-peer consultative workshops for nature reserve staff	100 percent Experts involved in nature reserve staff training, and there are regular consultative meetings with the PMO, as required in the TOR for the expert contract. So far, there have been 11 expert contracts.	Achieved Six peer-to-peer consultative workshops for nature reserve staff to enable the sharing of experiences and practices. Also, a study tour for nature reserve staff on nature reserve management in Sichuan Province was organized by Green Anhui.	Verified by evidence of workshops
Output 4.1.4	Project monitoring system providing six monthly reports on progress in achieving project outputs and outcomes		One system and ten progress reports	100 percent	Achieved Progress reports delivered	Verified by document review

Outcome/ output	Indicator	Baseline	End-of-project target	Achievement at mid-term evaluation	Achievement at project end	Evaluation team comment
Output 4.1.5	Mid-term and final evaluations carried out and reports disseminated	No evaluations exist at present	Two evaluation reports	100 percent	Achieved Mid-term evaluation finalized and disseminated; terminal evaluation (this evaluation) in progress	Verified by document review

Appendix 6. Example of tool for semi-structured interview

Questions/discussion points for semi-structured interview with:

- **Project Management Office (PMO)**
- **Executing Agency (HSAC)**

Note: record interviewee name(s), organization/agency, date of interview, and online or face-to-face:

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Introduction

□	Thank the participant(s).
□	Introduce the evaluators and explain we are independent consultants for FAO.
□	Briefly explain purpose of the evaluation.
□	"You have been identified as an important stakeholder who can help us with our evaluation."
□	"This discussion is confidential between you, the Evaluation Team and the FAO evaluation manager."
□	"Any questions before we start?"

Overview

- Please explain your personal involvement in the project (including how long involved).
- Please explain the role of your organization/agency in the project.

Relevance

- Were project outcomes consistent with government and agency priorities and strategies?
- If applicable, did the project become either more or less relevant since it was designed?
- To what extent was the project developed and implemented in line with the needs of local communities at project sites?

Effectiveness

- Is there any final reporting against the outcomes and outputs in the results matrix? Our most recent reporting is the 2021 project implementation reviews and the July–December 2021 PPR.
- PMO: There is a lot of reporting in project implementation reviews and PPRs against outcomes and outputs, although we do not yet have any of the evidence. We would like to discuss how to arrange for us to receive the various evidence so that we can verify the achievements.
- PMO: We have specific progress questions that we will address during interviews and the mission. Some questions regarding reporting on outcomes in the results matrix:
    - Outcome 2.1a – "number of ha of protected areas for which management efficiency is increased" – how is this being measured?

- Outcome 2.1b – is monitoring data available for all species under this indicator? Has there been monitoring for *Paa spinosa* and the four indicator plant species?
- Outcome 4.1 – Tier 3 and 4 nature reserves "adopting new approaches" – how is this being measured?
- Please summarize the activities under output 2.1.3 (including establishment of community co-management committees and sustainable production activities in villages)

- What are the major challenges faced by the project during implementation and how were they overcome? What lessons can be learned from this?

Efficiency

- Was the OPIM modality an efficient way to execute the project? Do you have examples of where it has reduced/increased costs? Any suggestions about how it could be done better?
- Did FAO provide the level of technical and administrative support needed to implement the project under the OPIM modality?
- To what extent did the institutional arrangements (FAO execution and FAO as GEF implementing agency) contribute to efficient implementation?
- In your opinion, to what extent has the project been implemented efficiently and cost-effectively?
- Please describe what you see as important partnerships and synergies that contributed to results.
- Was the cofinancing made available to the project as planned?

Sustainability

- Are there particular risks to the sustainability of the project's results?
- Are there any barriers still present that may constrain the sustainability of the project's results?
- Do you have any suggestions about what could be done to increase the likelihood of the results being sustainable?
- Did the OPIM contribute to ensure major ownership and sustainability of the project results?

Factors affecting implementation

- Did FAO provide appropriate levels of oversight, supervision and backstopping (technical, administrative and operational)?
- What have been the main challenges in relation to the management and administration of the project?
- What have been the main financial management challenges of the project?
- Did the project include a stakeholder engagement strategy? If so, was it implemented effectively and continuously to engage relevant stakeholders?
- Were sufficient resources (human, financial, etc.) available for OPIM implementation and execution?

- How has COVID-19 affected the implementation of the project? Have you changed some deliverables or made other adaptive management changes due to COVID-19?

Gender and other cross-cutting priorities

- Please summarize the extent to which gender considerations were taken into account in implementing and monitoring of the project. Was a gender action plan developed?
- Were other environmental and social concerns taken into consideration?

Conclusion

- Does the interviewee have any additional comments or any questions for the evaluators?
- We would like to interview the PMO again when we have undertaken most of our interviews and site visits, and to discuss final questions that we will have.
- Thank you again.

Appendix 7. Example of tool for focus group discussion (FGD)

Questions/discussion points for FGD with:

- Beneficiary villages

Note: record name and gender of all participants, date of interview, village name, and whether online or face-to-face:

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Introduction

□	Thank the participants.
□	Introduce the evaluators and explain we are independent consultants for FAO. Explain that the international consultant is not present.
□	Briefly explain purpose of the evaluation.
□	"You have been identified as important stakeholders who can help us with our evaluation, so we would like to hear about your experiences with the project."
□	"This discussion is confidential between you, the Evaluation Team and the FAO evaluation manager."
□	"Any questions before we start?"

Overview

- Ask all participants to introduce themselves and explain their role in the project (including how long involved).
- Please tell us about the FAO funding that you received and what your aims were for the it, including:
    - When did your village participate in the project?
    - How many village households were involved in the project?
    - What types of project activities did you participate in?
    - What benefits or improvements did you expect from the project?
    - What percentage of participants were female? Were there project activities that were specifically for women?
- More detail may be added when the Evaluation Team has a better understanding of this part of the project, especially Output 2.1.3.

Effectiveness

- Has the project delivered the expected improvements for your village? Please give details about the results from the project.
- What were some major challenges faced during project implementation, and how were they overcome?

- What experiences and lessons can be learned from this?

Relevance

- When the project selected the demonstration villages, did project experts visit them to help develop the project? Which experts consulted you? Did you feel like your needs were considered?
- Was the project implemented in line with your needs?

Sustainability

- Do you think that it is likely that the results from the project will continue now that the project has ended?
- Do you have any suggestions about what could be done to increase the likelihood of the results being sustainable?

Efficiency/Factors affecting implementation

- In your opinion, has the project been implemented efficiently?
- What were the main challenges in implementing the project? Were some challenges removed while the project was implemented?
- Did the PMO and HSAC provide adequate support during the project?
- During the project's implementation, did you feel that you were engaged effectively as an important part of the project?
- How has COVID-19 affected the implementation of the project? Have you changed some deliverables or made other adaptive management changes due to COVID-19?
- FAO and the GEF are planning and implementing other projects similar to this project in other locations. Do you have any suggestions for things that could be done better? Are there some things that were done well?

Conclusion

- Does the group have any additional comments or any questions?
- Thank you again.

Annexes

Annex 1. Terms of reference for the evaluation www.fao.org/evaluation/en