



Mid-term review of FAO-GEF Project

Sustainable Land Management for Improved Livelihoods in Degraded Areas of Iraq GCP/IRQ/003/GFF GEF ID - 9745

Final Report

**FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF
THE UNITED NATIONS - IRAQ**

September 2023

Contents

List of tables, figures and boxes	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Acronyms and abbreviations.....	vii
Executive summary	8
1. Introduction	20
1.1. <i>Purpose and scope of the MTR</i>	20
1.2. <i>Objective of the MTR</i>	20
1.3. <i>Intended users</i>	22
1.4. <i>Methodology</i>	24
1.5. <i>Data-collection methods and tools</i>	24
1.6. <i>Limitations</i>	25
2. Project background and context.....	26
3. Theory of change	29
4. Key findings and MTR questions.....	33
5. Conclusions and recommendations	43
5.1. <i>Conclusions</i>	43
5.2. <i>Recommendations</i>	45
6. Lessons learned	49
7. Appendices	50

List of tables, figures and boxes

Tables

FIGURES.....	v
TABLE 1 : GEF RATING TABLE	16
TABLE 2: INTENDED USERS OF THE MTR	22
TABLE 3: OVERVIEW OF PROJECT OBJECTIVES AND COMPONENTS	27
TABLE 4 : EXPENDITURE SUMMARY	39
TABLE 5 : RECOMMENDATIONS	45

Figures

FIGURE (1): PROJECT SITES	29
FIGURE (2): THE PROJECT'S THEORY OF CHANGE TOC	32

Boxes

BOX 1: MAIN MTR QUESTIONS (AS DEFINED IN THE TOR OF THE MTR).....	21
---	----

Acknowledgements

The MTR was carried out with the invaluable assistance of FAO staff of the Iraq Country Office. Their insight, knowledge, advice and comments made this MTR possible. The MTR consultant would like to thank all those who contributed to this MTR, led by Dr. Salah ElHaj Hassan FAO representative, and supported by Ms Ydidiya Abera in the FAO GEF Coordination Office (FAO GEF CU).

The MTR benefited greatly from the inputs of other stakeholders, including government officers in both Thi-Qar and Muthana governorates. Their contributions were critical to the MTR team's work and are deeply appreciated.

MTR team

- Amjad Attar (International Consultant and Team Leader)

FAO GEF CU staff

- Ms Ydidiya Abera (Programme Officer – MTR Focal Point)

Acronyms and abbreviations

AE	Agro-Ecology
CA	Conservation Agriculture
CAD	Conservation Agriculture Department
ESS	Environmental and Social Safeguards
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FGDs	Focus Group Discussions
FFS	Farmer Field School
GCF	Green Climate Fund
GEF	Global Environment Facility
GEF CU	GEF Coordination Unit (at FAO)
GIS	Geographical Information System
GOI	Government of Iraq
HQ	Head Quarter
IDPs	Internally Displaced Peoples
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRQ	Iraq
KIIs	Key Informant Interviews
LDN	The Land Degradation Neutrality Targets
LPIU	Local Project Implementation Unit
LTO	Lead Technical Officer
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MEAs	Multilateral Environmental Agreements
MoA	Ministry of Agriculture
MoE	Ministry of Environment
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MoWR	Ministry of Water Resources
MTR	Mid Term Review
NAP	National Adaptation Plan
NDCs	Nationally Determined Contributions
NSP	The Plant Production and Protection Division of FAO
NSPCD	National Strategic Plan for Combating Desertification
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PMU	Project Management Unit
PPG	Project Preparation Grant
SC	Steering Committee
SLM	Sustainable Land Management
SLMILDA	Sustainable Land Management for Improved Livelihoods in Degraded Areas of Iraq
ToC	Theory of Change
ToR	Terms of Reference
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Executive summary

Introduction

1. This MTR report presents the results of the Mid-Term Review (MTR) of the project GCP/IRQ/003/GFF "Sustainable Land Management for Improved Livelihoods in Degraded Areas of Iraq". Terms of Reference (ToR) for the MTR followed the FAO-GEF Guide for Planning and Conducting Mid-Term Reviews of FAO-GEF Projects and Programmes (2020). The MTR was carried out during the period January till May 2023 while the data collection was implemented from mid-March to mid-April 2023.
2. The scope of the MTR covers the period of project implementation from January 2020 to mid-April 2023. It includes the selected areas in Muthanna and Thi-Qar governorates and all activities undertaken and all outputs under the four components of the project. The MTR engaged the Project team, the Government of Iraq, more specifically the Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Water Resources, and the Local Project Implementation Units. The MTR reviewed developments in the context of the project's implementation, the progress level, and the main challenges encountered the project implementation.
3. The purpose of this MTR is to provide an independent mid-term assessment of the progress in the implementation of the project, and to assess relevance, efficiency, sustainability, factors affecting performance and delivery and cross-cutting dimensions: gender and equity concerns, environmental and social safeguards.
4. The MTR was guided by Terms of Reference and adheres to the United Nations MTR Group Norms and Standards and Ethical guidelines. A checklist of questions for interviews with the project's key stakeholders was prepared. A semi structured interview tool was designed for this purpose. The interviews were conducted using the MS Teams online platform. Three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted, one FGD with the members of the Project Management Unit PMU (4 participants), one with the Local Project Implementation Unit LPIU – Muthana (7 participants), and one with the Local Project Implementation Unit LPIU – Thi Qar (8 participants).

Main findings

MTR question 1 –Relevance

Are the project outcomes congruent with country priorities, GEF focal areas/operational programme strategies, the FAO Country Programming Framework and the needs and priorities of targeted beneficiaries (local communities, men and women, and indigenous peoples, if relevant)?

5. All stakeholders interviewed by the MTR consultant see the Project as highly relevant to their key development concerns. Stakeholders displayed strong feelings of ownership and have articulated ideas on how this project will contribute to develop national capacities of the organizations responsible for sustainable land management which will in turn help them in developing and implementing conservation agriculture, agroecology and sustainable livelihood practices and systems.

MTR question 2 –Coherence

To what extent the project addresses the synergies and interlinkages between the intervention and other interventions carried out by the same institution/government? (Internal coherence). To what

extent the project considers the consistency of the intervention with other actors' interventions in the same context? (External coherence).

6. The project design is coherent with Government policies. Government implementing agencies at all levels (central, and local) all judge the Project to be highly coherent with Government development goals and policies.
7. The project design is coherent with the GEF's Land Degradation Focal Area Objective LD-1 and with the other two GEF financed projects implemented in Iraq. The project's intended outcomes are congruent with GEF focal areas/operational programme strategies, namely the Land Degradation LD-1 Program 1: Maintain or improve flow of agro-ecosystem services to sustain food production and livelihoods. The project will contribute to Outcomes 1.1) Improved agricultural, rangeland and pastoral management; and 1.2) functionality and cover of agro-ecosystems maintained. As for the other GEF Financed Initiatives.
8. The design of the project is coherent with FAO Strategic Objectives and priorities. The Project design contributes directly to the FAO's Strategic Framework and Strategic Objective SO2 "Increase and improve provision of goods and services from agriculture, forestry and fisheries in a sustainable manner" and Strategic Objective 5 "Increase the resilience of livelihoods from disaster".

MTR question 3 –Effectiveness

To what extent has the project delivered on its outputs, outcomes and objectives?

9. The MTR assesses the likelihood that the project will make a substantive contribution to the longer-term intended changes and impacts as presented in the reconstructed Theory of Change. The likelihood of impact being achieved in the future is assessed based on the internal logic of the project, the assessment of effectiveness, and verification of drivers and assumptions. As no outputs have been achieved and there is thus no progress towards outcomes, there has been no progress towards achieving long-term results and impact until now.
10. The Project consists of four components, as for component one; the MTR found that some activities that would lead to the achievement of the outputs have been implemented. None of the outputs as described in the Project's RF have been realized. Under component two, only one output fully achieved so far and two outputs in progress out of six outputs. Some activities to achieve the outputs under component three are implemented so far. Under component four, the MTR found some evident on few activities that were implemented.

MTR question 4 –Efficiency

To what extent has the project been implemented efficiently and cost effectively?

11. The project is well behind its implementation schedule and there are major delays in the delivery of the project activities. These delays were caused by several factors as stated previously under points 65 and 66 above including the political instability of the country which negatively impacted the communication with the local authorities, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic with restricted movement imposed for most of 2020/21, and the late approval from the Government of Iraq on the project's sites selected to implement the project especially in Thi-Qar governorate.

MTR question 5 –Sustainability

What is the likelihood that the project results will be useful or persist after the end of the project?

12. The MTR found that the executing partners (ministry of agriculture and ministry of Environment (MoE) did not yet obtain the capacities to undertake all project activities. While the project design is built on sustaining the project outputs through capacity building and institutional development, most of the outputs are not achieved yet. However, establishing a project national steering committee, national PMU and LPIUs would positively affect sustaining the project outputs when realized.

MTR question 6 –Factors affecting performance

What are the main other factors affecting the project in reaching its results, and how are they affecting the project's performance? (Consider project design and readiness; project execution and management arrangements; project oversight; financial management and co-financing; project partnerships and stakeholder engagement; communication, knowledge management and knowledge product, M&E design and implementation).

13. The project design was elaborate and followed the requirements of GEF. The Project's Theory of Change was well structured to achieve the Project's objective. This was highly articulated through addressing the main challenges and barriers the country faces.
14. The MTR found that the project currently is being managed by a PMU established at FAO Iraq office. Project monitoring is carried out by the Project Management Unit (PMU) and the FAO budget holder. The MTR through KIIs found some evidence that the establishment of these mechanisms helped the project to gain its recent momentum.
15. FAO Iraq country office representative was present in the Steering Committee, and the Local Project Implementation Units' meetings to provide oversights and discuss challenges faced the project implementation at all levels. While national bodies to oversee the project implementation were not established until recently, the Steering Committee for the project was established in August 2021 and only one Steering Committee meeting was held since then.
16. The MTR could not find evidence on the materialized co-financing from the Government of Iraq. In practice, there is still a large gap and room for improvement in the commitment of the Government of Iraq's to co-finance project implementation activities where the lack of financial support in the form of co-financing from the Government of Iraq remains a challenge.
17. The MTR collected evidence that showed a shortage in regular coordination/communication between central level authorities and between central and local authorities. Since the start of the project in January 2020, one meeting of the Project Steering Committee was conducted and it was conducted after more than one year of the start of project implementation in August 2021.
18. No (public) communication and awareness raising activities have been implemented yet and therefore it is too early to assess any influence of the project on attitudes and behaviors. As the project did not yet achieve any of the anticipated results, the MTR was not able to collect any evidence to judge how the communication and awareness raising activities are likely to support the sustainability and scaling up of project results.

19. The project monitoring is conducted through the Project Implementation Review (PIR) reports. The project team is responsible for producing these reports annually.
20. The project so far did not develop any field-based impact monitoring or co financing report. As for the evaluation, the project M&E plan includes a mid-term review and a final evaluation. The current MTR is implemented as part of this set plan.

MTR question 7 –Cross cutting dimensions (including gender and ESS)

*To what extent were gender considerations considered in designing and implementing the project?
To what extent were environmental and social concerns taken into consideration in the design and implementation of the project?*

21. Gender and social analysis were undertaken during the Project Preparation Grant PPG phase with involvement of a national expert. The project addressed well this dimension through integrating sex disaggregated indicators within its Strategic Results Matrix, and those indicators are monitored and reported as per the plan. The project targets smallholders and marshland areas in middle and southern Iraq that have a high number of vulnerable farmer communities and specifically targets equal number of women and men beneficiaries in these areas. However, the evidence fell short in supporting the actual implementation of the activities targeting these beneficiaries.
22. Environmental and Social Management Assessment has been identified in the Project Document. The project is classified of low Environmental and Social risk. The project follows FAO's Environmental and Social Standards. Part of the project team's responsibilities was to monitor the implementation of the plan for social and environmental safeguards, in accordance with the FAO Environmental and Social Safeguards.

Overall progress on implementation

23. Overall progress on implementation has been assessed as **moderately unsatisfactory** as the Project had an unfortunate start, and thus no outputs were achieved, and no outcomes are on track to be achieved, and only few (although important) activities could be implemented. The MTR took into consideration that the COVID19 pandemic, the political situations, and the late approval from the Government of Iraq on the project's sites selected to implement the project were outside of the control of project management. However, the MTR team recognizes a progress in implementing some of the project activities and the project is gaining momentum. It is a highly relevant project, so it is important to try to achieve its expected outputs. The project is moving in the right direction but should be given time to address the issues identified in this MTR.

Conclusions (summarized)

Conclusion 1 (Relevance): The project aligns strategically with national priorities, donor strategic priorities, existing interventions, and the FAO strategic Framework and the FAO Country Programming Framework. The project design was well-received, and key stakeholders confirmed the continued relevance of the project and its activities for the country. The project is coherent with the Government's environmental policies. Despite implementation challenges, the project design's relevance remains highly satisfactory.

Conclusion 2 (Effectiveness): As so few activities were implemented and some outputs were achieved but with no outcomes yet observed, it was difficult to assess most of the criteria for this MTR. Despite limited implementation progress, the project is making some headway, but progress remains unsatisfactory. Most key output targets are yet to be met.

Conclusion 3 (Efficiency): Project implementation faced hindrances from the COVID-19 lockdown and political instability, which negatively impacted communication with local authorities and delayed implementation. Despite some delivered outputs, no observed outcomes, and limited progress toward objectives, the project will not realize its expected results if the project ends as initially planned on January 2024.

Conclusion 4 (Sustainability): Assessing all sustainability aspects of the project was not possible for the MTR due to limited project activities. However, the Project Document addressed sustainability through capacity building and government stakeholder engagement, knowledge sharing, and ensuring positive impacts on beneficiaries' lives and livelihoods. Overall, the sustainability of the SLMILDA project ad judged through the design is moderately satisfactory.

Conclusion 5 (Factors affecting progress): The project design was commensurate and aligned with GEF requirements. There is still a large gap and room for improvement in the commitment of the Government of Iraq's to co-finance project implementation activities. The establishment of the national project management units PMU and the LPIU across the national structure all the way to the grassroots Governorate field level were delayed and thus delayed the project implementation. However, the recent establishment of these structures cleared and reduced bottlenecks and shortcomings in project implementation.

Recommendations

24. Based on the findings and conclusions, the MTR has prepared the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1 (Effectiveness)	The MTR recommends a No Cost extension of the project until January 2026, to make it possible for the project team and the executing partners to achieve the project outputs and outcomes.
Rationale for recommendation	<p>The political instability of the country from 2019 to 2021 negatively impacted the communication with the local authorities and this delayed project implementation. The project implementation progress was further derailed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic with restricted movement imposed in much of 2020/21. Furthermore, even though the elections were held in October 2021, the political situation was still volatile, and the project communication channels remained a major challenge.</p> <p>The project's Theory of Change requires reasonable time for the planned four integrated components designed to result in the achievement of the project objective. Each component is designed to catalyse and result in the transformations required to assist southern Iraq to move towards production modalities of Conservation Agriculture, Agroecology and Marshland conservation practices that support Sustainable Land Management.</p>

	<p>FAO in Iraq is promoting the adoption of Conservation Agriculture principles (minimum mechanical soil disturbance (no/zero-tillage, permanent soil cover and crop rotations) that are universally applicable in all agricultural landscapes and cropping systems. However, the project lost time, through delays and the remaining project timeline is too limiting for the purpose of achieving the intended project objective. For instance, it requires demonstrating crop rotations and crop residue/ soil organic matter built up for over 4 to 6 cropping seasons for farmers to start realizing the benefits (economic, agronomic and environmental) of adopting the new technologies of Conservation Agriculture and Agroecology practices for improved Sustainable Land Management. To be widely adopted, all new technology needs to have benefits and advantages that attract a broad group of farmers who understand the differences between the Conventional Agriculture and what they need to adopt for Sustainable Agriculture. Under the existing situation, where the remaining project duration will only allow for one cropping season with neither crop rotation nor crop residue built up, thus the productive landscape of southern Iraq under the project will not measurably contribute to the achievement of global environmental and economic benefits.</p> <p>Conservation agriculture is based on restoring naturally occurring processes and therefore needs a reasonable conversion period before the Conservation Agriculture and Agroecology systems are established and the natural balances are restored. After losing 2 years of the project duration due to the COVID-19 pandemic related restrictions and political instability in the project locations, the project which is planned to end in January 2024 will not be able to achieve most of its important impactful targets. The project objective is to reverse land degradation processes, conserve biodiversity and sustainably manage land and water resources in degraded marshland ecosystems in southern Iraq for greater access to services from resilient ecosystems and improved livelihoods. To achieve such an ecosystem-based project objective, a budgetary review and No Cost Project Extension of 24 months is recommended.</p> <p>The MTR has assessed that the project is very relevant to all stakeholders and in line with GEF, FAO and country priorities. Interviewees confirmed the importance of implementing the project activities and achieving the main project results. Considering all the above, the MTR team considers that the project results, and the outputs and outcomes, can be achieved if the project is granted an extension.</p>
Responsibility	FAO-GEF Coordination Unit
Proposed timeframe	As soon as possible
Recommendation 2 (Effectiveness)	Develop a Detailed Implementation Plan and implement a Risk Management Plan
Rationale for recommendation	Create a detailed annual project implementation plan that outlines specific and detailed activities, timelines, responsibilities, and resource allocation. This annual plan should be properly endorsed and

	communicated to national stakeholders. The Risk Management Plan should identify potential risks and their mitigation strategies. This helps to anticipate and address challenges before they escalate.
Responsibility	FAO-Iraq, PMU, Project Task Force, and the Government of Iraq
Proposed timeframe	As soon as possible

Recommendation 3 (Factors affecting performance- Co-financing)	The Project Team should officially Identify the mechanisms for the implementation of the Iraqi Government's in-kind Contributions to the Project
Rationale for recommendation	<p>An official agreement should be prepared and endorsed by the government that clearly shows the type of in-kind contributions expected from the Iraqi government to the project accompanied by a clear timeline for its implementation. The progress in making these contributions should be a standing item on the Steering Committee meeting agenda.</p> <p>Despite the efforts put by FAO Iraq and the Project Team to bring together different stakeholders through conducting regular meetings with Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Agriculture, and Ministry of Water Resources to discuss the challenges and the key issues facing the project implementation and its progress, yet there is still a large gap and room for improvement in the commitment of the Government of Iraq's to co-finance project implementation activities. One of the main agreements during the National Project Steering Committee meetings was the promotion and commitment of co-finance obligations from the Government of Iraq through the Ministry of Environment and other ministries.</p> <p>The Project Team and FAO Iraq should make strong emphasis on this important issue with the Government of Iraq through the Ministry of Environment as the executing partner.</p>
Responsibility	FAO Iraq and the Project Team
Proposed timeframe	As soon as possible

Recommendation 4 (Factors affecting performance- Partnerships and stakeholder engagement)	FAO to ensure that the coordination and oversight mechanisms will be strengthened as soon as possible, including regular meetings of the Project Steering Committee, and the Local Project Implementation Units and enhance the collaboration with Local government Partners through the established mechanisms to speed up project implementation
Rationale for recommendation	<p>Despite the project start date being 01 January 2020, the first National Project Steering Committee was set up and the first Steering Committee meeting was held on 24th of August 2021.</p> <p>The delayed set up of the National Project Steering Committee and the onset of the Steering Committee meeting, this alone is a major indicator</p>

	<p>explaining why the project activity implementation is behind the scheduled timeline.</p> <p>Although the executing partners expressed commitment to the project, both to the MTR team as well as in recent meetings with FAO staff, this commitment was not corroborated by the modest level of progress in implementation. It is therefore essential that FAO ensures that effective relationships and coalitions are built and the project executing, and oversight structures are made operational (such as the Project Steering Committee and Local Project Implementation Unit).</p> <p>Introduce proper activities for effective and timely collaboration with the project stakeholders through the established national mechanisms to keep all stakeholders informed about the project's progress, challenges, and solutions. This effective and timely collaboration would include preparing TORs for the Steering Committee, national PMU, and LPIUs that identify their role in the project implementation. Additionally, a clear procedure that outlines the number of meetings that should be held in the year, the quorum for the committee meetings, and the decision-making process with the committee/units could be established to ensure effective coordination. Having a written document that outlines the committee/units' responsibilities and expected role would help build trust, enhance national ownership, and fosters a supportive environment for addressing implementation challenges collaboratively to ensure smoother implementation.</p>
Responsibility	Project Team and FAO Iraq
Proposed timeframe	As soon as possible

Recommendation 5 (Factors affecting performance- Monitoring and Evaluation)	Monitor and Evaluate Progress for adaptive management
Rationale for recommendation	Effectively implement the monitoring and evaluation activities for the timely tracking of project progress and the identification of bottlenecks. Ensure the timely dissemination of the results to the relevant decision-makers that can make timely adjustments to improve project implementation.
Responsibility	FAO-Iraq and the PMU
Proposed timeframe	As soon as possible

GEF rating table

Ratings: Highly satisfactory (HS), Satisfactory (S), Moderately satisfactory (MS), Moderately unsatisfactory (MU), Unsatisfactory (U) Highly unsatisfactory (HU) Unable to assess (UA).

Table 1 : GEF Rating table

GEF criteria/sub-criteria	Rating	Summary comments
A. STRATEGIC RELEVANCE		
A1. Overall strategic relevance	HS	The project is strategic relevant and is fully in line with national and global priorities, as well as GEF and FAO strategic objectives.
A1.1. Alignment with GEF and FAO strategic priorities	HS	<p>The project is aligned with GEF land degradation LD-1 and with two GEF financed project and implemented in Iraq. The project's intended outcomes are congruent with GEF focal areas/operational programme strategies, namely the Land Degradation LD-1 Program 1: Maintain or improve flow of agro-ecosystem services to sustain food production and livelihoods. The project will contribute to Outcomes 1.1) Improved agricultural, rangeland and pastoral management; and 1.2) functionality and cover of agro-ecosystems maintained.</p> <p>The project contributes directly to the FAO's Strategic Framework and Strategic Objective SO2 "Increase and improve provision of goods and services from agriculture, forestry and fisheries in a sustainable manner" and Strategic Objective 5 "Increase the resilience of livelihoods from disaster". Additionally, it contributes to the FAO's Iraq Country Programming Framework Priority Areas: (B) Building up the investment projects portfolio for agricultural development; (C) Technical assistance, normative work and guidance on subsector and cross cutting themes and issues.</p>
A1.2. Relevance to national, regional and global priorities and beneficiary needs	HS	The project is fully in line with the key priorities of the Government of Iraq. It is aligned with national policies and plans, namely <i>The National Strategy for Poverty Reduction in Iraq 2009</i> , <i>The Iraq National Development Plan (2013-2017)</i> , <i>Agriculture for Development in Iraq</i> , <i>The National Strategic Plan for Combating Desertification (NSPCD)</i> , and <i>the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (2015-2020)</i> , <i>The Land Degradation Neutrality Targets</i> , and <i>the Nationally determined contributions of Iraq</i> .

B. EFFECTIVENESS		
B1. Overall assessment of project results	MU	The project had an unfortunate start, and thus no outputs were achieved, and no outcomes are on track to be achieved, and only few (although important) activities could be implemented. The MTR took into consideration that the COVID19 pandemic, the political situations, and the late approval from the Government of Iraq on the project's sites selected to implement the project were outside of the control of project management. However, the MTR team recognizes a progress in implementing some of the project activities and the project is gaining momentum. It is a highly relevant project, so it is important to try to achieve its expected outputs. The project is moving in the right direction but should be given time to address the issues identified in this MTR.
C. EFFICIENCY		
C1. Efficiency	MU	The project is well behind its implementation schedule and there are major delays in the delivery of the project activities. These delays were caused by several factors as stated previously under points 65 and 66 above including the political instability of the country which negatively impacted the communication with the local authorities, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic with restricted movement imposed for most of 2020/21, and the late approval from the Government of Iraq on the project's sites selected to implement the project.
D. SUSTAINABILITY OF PROJECT OUTCOMES		
D1. Sustainability	ML	Although it is too early to make any judgment on sustainability as few activities have been executed, the MTR found that the executing partners (ministry of agriculture and ministry of Environment (MoE) did not yet obtain the capacities to undertake all project activities. The interviews conducted by the MTR consultant indicated that they need technical and coordination support as well as trainings from FAO. While the project design is built on sustaining the project outputs through capacity building and institutional development, most of the outputs are not achieved yet. However, establishing a project national steering

		committee, national PMU and LPIUs would positively affect sustaining the project outputs when realized. Additionally, training extension officers from the MoA on CA and Agroecology would sustain these capacities within the government of Iraq.
E. FACTORS AFFECTING PERFORMANCE		
E1. Project design	HS	The project design was very elaborated and followed the requirements of GEF. The Project's Theory of Change was well structured to achieve the Project's objective to reverse land degradation processes, conserve and sustainably manage land and water resources in degraded marshland ecosystems in Southern Iraq for greater access to services from resilient ecosystems and improved livelihoods.
E2. Quality of project execution and management arrangements	MS	Few activities have been implemented. Therefore, it is difficult to assess this criterion. However, the MTR found that the project currently is being managed by a PMU established at FAO Iraq office. Project monitoring is carried out by the Project Management Unit (PMU) and the FAO budget holder. Project performance is monitored using the project results matrix, including indicators (baseline and targets) and annual work plans and budgets.
E3. project oversight by FAO as the GEF Agency and national partners	MS	The MTR collected evidence that FAO Iraq country office representative was present in the Steering Committee, and the Local Project Implementation Units' meetings to provide oversights and discuss challenges faced the project implementation at all levels. While national bodies to oversee the project implementation were not established until recently, the Steering Committee for the project was established in August 2021 and only one Steering Committee meeting was held since then. The MTR found that the establishment of the national oversight mechanisms was delayed and the frequency of its meetings to provide the required oversight of the implementation and the timely and effective response to solve project implementation obstacles is still needs improvement.
E4. Co-financing	MU	The MTR could not find evidence on the materialized co-financing from the

		Government of Iraq. In practice, there is still a large gap and room for improvement in the commitment of the Government of Iraq's to co-finance project implementation activities where the lack of financial support in the form of co-financing from the Government of Iraq remains a challenge.
E5. Partnerships and stakeholder engagement	MU	The MTR collected evidence that showed a shortage in regular coordination/communication between central level authorities and between central and local authorities. The set up of the National Project Steering Committee was delayed due to the long process of nominating the committee's members. Since the start of the project in January 2020, one meeting of the Project Steering Committee was conducted and it was conducted after more than one year of the start of project implementation in August 2021.
E6. Communication and knowledge management	U	No (public) communication and awareness raising activities have been implemented yet and therefore it is too early to assess any influence of the project on attitudes and behaviors. As the project did not yet achieve any of the anticipated results, the MTR was not able to collect any evidence to judge how the communication and awareness raising activities are likely to support the sustainability and scaling up of project results.
E7. Monitoring and evaluation design	MS	The project monitoring is conducted through the Project Implementation Review (PIR) reports. The project team is responsible for producing these reports annually. These reports include progress against implementation and updates to the list of indicators and the tracking tables. These reports are shared with the evaluation officer at FAO-Iraq office and the analysis of the results are communicated to the management. The project so far did not develop any field-based impact monitoring or co financing report. Recently, the project team started reporting on the quarter indicators of GEF. As for the evaluation, the project M&E plan includes a mid-term review and a final evaluation. The current MTR is implemented as part of this set plan.

1. Introduction

1.1. *Purpose and scope of the MTR*

25. This report presents the results of the Mid-Term Review (MTR) of the project GCP/IRQ/003/GFF “Sustainable Land Management for Improved Livelihoods in Degraded Areas of Iraq”. Terms of Reference (ToR) for the MTR followed the FAO-GEF Guide for Planning and Conducting Mid-Term Reviews of FAO-GEF Projects and Programmes (2020). The MTR was carried out during the period January till May 2023 while the data collection was implemented from mid-March to mid-April 2023. The purpose of this MTR is to provide an independent mid-term assessment of the progress in the implementation of the project, and to assess relevance, efficiency, sustainability, factors affecting performance and delivery and cross-cutting dimensions: gender and equity concerns, environmental and social safeguards. Additionally, the MTR aims to inform the FAO GEF team and other stakeholders about project progress and effectiveness in achieving the expected project objectives and outputs.
26. The Terms of Reference (ToR) of the MTR specifies the following main aims of the MTR:
- Provide accountability – to respond to the information needs and interests of policymakers and other actors with decision-making power (FAO Iraq management and the FAO GEF CU);
 - Improve the project/programme – project/programme improvement and organizational development provide valuable information to managers and others responsible for regular project/programme operations (the PMU, PTF, FAO GEF CU and PSC); and
 - Contribute to knowledge – in-depth understanding and contextualization of the project/programme and its practices, of particular benefit to the FAO GEF CU, FAO staff and future developers and implementers.
 - Inform on any corrective measures to overcome challenges and success stories to scale up.
27. The scope of the MTR covers the period of project implementation from January 2020 to mid-April 2023. It includes the selected areas in Muthanna and Thi Qar governorates and all activities undertaken and all outputs under the four components of the project. The MTR engaged the Project team, the Government of Iraq, more specifically the Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Water Resources, and the Local Project Implementation Units. The MTR reviewed developments in the context of the project’s implementation, the progress level, and the main challenges encountered the project implementation.

1.2. *Objective of the MTR*

28. The main objective of the MTR was to assess progress towards expected outcomes and identify areas in need of improvement and/or corrective actions to achieve its target results. The main review questions were formulated in the inception report as:

Box 1: Main MTR questions (as defined in the ToR of the MTR)

<p>Relevance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the project outcomes congruent with country priorities, GEF focal areas/operational programme strategies, the FAO Country Programming Framework and the needs and priorities of targeted beneficiaries (local communities, men and women, and indigenous peoples, if relevant)? • Has there been any change in the relevance of the project since its formulation, such as the adoption of new national policies, plans or programmes that affect the relevance of the project's objectives and goals? If so, are there any changes that need to be made to the project to make it more relevant
<p>Coherence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (<i>Internal coherence</i>) to what extent the project addresses the synergies and interlinkages between the intervention and other interventions carried out by the same institution/government? • (<i>External coherence</i>) to what extent the project considers the consistency of the intervention with other actors' interventions in the same context?
<p>Effectiveness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (<i>Delivery of results</i>) To what extent has the project delivered on its outputs, outcomes and objectives? • (<i>Likelihood of impact</i>) Are there any barriers or other risks that may prevent future progress towards and the achievement of the project's longer-term objectives?
<p>Efficiency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent has the project been implemented efficiently and cost effectively? • To what extent has the project built on existing agreements, initiatives, data sources, synergies and complementarities with other projects, partnerships, etc. and avoided duplication of similar activities by other groups and initiatives?
<p>Sustainability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the likelihood that the project results will be useful or persist after the end of the project? • What are the key risks that may affect the sustainability of the project results and its benefits (consider financial, socioeconomic, institutional and governance, and environmental aspects)?
<p>Factors affecting progress</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (<i>Project design</i>) Is the project design suited to delivering the expected outcomes? Is the project's causal logic (per its theory of change) coherent and clear? • (<i>Project execution and management</i>) To what extent did the executing agency effectively discharge its role and responsibilities in managing and administering the project? • (<i>Financial management and co-financing</i>) What have been the financial-management challenges of the project?

- *(Project oversight, implementation role)* To what extent has FAO delivered oversight and supervision and backstopping (technical, administrative and operational) during project identification, formulation, approval, start-up and execution?
- *(Partnerships and stakeholder engagement)* To what extent have stakeholders, such as government agencies, civil society, indigenous populations, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, people with disabilities and the private sector, been involved in project formulation and implementation?
- *Communication and knowledge management)* How effective has the project been in communicating and promoting its key messages and results to partners, stakeholders and a general audience?
- *(M&E design)* Is the project's M&E system practical and sufficient?
- *(M&E implementation)* Does the M&E system operate per the M&E plan? Has information been gathered in a systematic manner, using appropriate methodologies?

Cross-cutting priorities

- *Gender and minority groups, including indigenous peoples, disadvantaged, vulnerable and people with disabilities)* To what extent were gender considerations considered in designing and implementing the project?
- *(Environmental and Social Safeguards ESS)* To what extent were environmental and social concerns taken into consideration in the design and implementation of the project?

1.3. *Intended users*

29. The main intended users of the MTR report are FAO Iraq, FAO RNE and HQ, project team and project partners at the national level; project executing agencies at governorate level and the project beneficiaries. The MTR consultant described the (anticipated) role of the different stakeholders in the project, provided reasons for the inclusion of these stakeholders in the MTR, prioritized the stakeholders for involvement in the MTR, and explained how the stakeholders were involved during the MTR as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Intended users of the MTR

Intended users	What is their role in the project?	What is the reason for their inclusion in or exclusion from the MTR?
FAO Iraq technical Project Team, BH, LTO, HQ technical officer, FLO, /PMU.	- Implementation and coordination of all project's activities. - Oversight and supervision roles.	- Project team at country, regional and HQ level to provide technical and operational information/data related to the project cycle
Local Project Implementation Unit LPIU	- Implementation of project activities at field level	- To discuss the coordination structure at field level
National Centre for Water Resource Management	- Implementation of the project's water management plan in SLM/CA in partnership with MoE and MoA	- To discuss complementarities and relevance of activities under Output 1 and 2

Intended users	What is their role in the project?	What is the reason for their inclusion in or exclusion from the MTR?
Ministry of Environment (MoE), including the GEF OFF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Executive Partner from Gol - Responsible for the overall execution of the project's activities; coordinate with other national stakeholders. - Provision of digital mapping services. 	- To discuss the project's progress, challenges, gaps, strategic priorities, opportunities and way forward
Ministry of Agriculture (MoA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In partnership with other national partners provide execution resources and technical SLM/CA support. - Provision of digital mapping services. 	- To discuss collaboration, plans and activities and contribution
Ministry of Water Resources (MoWR)	- execution of the project's water management plan in SLM/CA in partnership with MoE and MoA.	- To discuss collaboration, plans and activities and contribution
Muthanna Governorate	- Instrumental for project site level implementation Al Salman district and Al-Rumaitha district (sub-district Al-Majid)	- To discuss/review project's activities in the targeted districts, including selection of beneficiaries and support staff
Thi-Qar Governorate	<p>Instrumental for project site level implementation is throughout 11 districts and 2 sub-districts of ThiQar governorate, namely:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Altar (Sub District) - Al-Manar (Sub District) - Germat Saeed (District) - Al-Chebaych (District) - Al-Eslah (District) - Al Gharaf (District) - Sikar(District) - Shatra (District) - Dawaya (District) - Refaea (District) - Al-Fajer (District) - Al-Fhood (District) - Al-Nasir (District) 	- To discuss/review project's activities in the targeted districts, including selection of beneficiaries and support staff
Iraqi Farmer's Association	- Provide support in the development of Farmer Associations and cooperatives at the smallholder level.	- To discuss engagement and contribution to the project activities

1.4. *Methodology*

30. The MTR was guided by Terms of Reference and adheres to the United Nations MTR Group Norms and Standards and Ethical guidelines¹. It employed a minimum set of criteria, grouped into seven categories, in line with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD/DAC) taking into consideration relevance, coherence (Internal and External), effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, factors affecting performance, and cross-cutting dimensions. The overall approach and methodology of the MTR followed the guidelines outlined in the FAO-GEF MTR Guide². The MTR adopted a consultative and transparent approach with internal and external stakeholders who kept informed throughout the MTR process. The MTR consultant ensured triangulation of evidence and information collected from stakeholders to verify and validate information before reaching conclusions.

1.5. *Data-collection methods and tools*

31. The MTR consultant prepared a checklist of questions for interviews with the project's key stakeholders. A semi structured interview tool was designed for this purpose as shown in Annex (I). The interviews were conducted using the MS Teams online platform.
32. The MTR consultant conducted 3 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), one FGD with the members of the Project Management Unit PMU (4 participants), one with the Local Project Implementation Unit LPIU – Muthana (7 participants), and one with the Local Project Implementation Unit LPIU – Thi Qar (8 participants).
33. These interviews were based on the MTR questions to complete missing information and check validity and quality and to cross-validate findings.
34. **Sample and sampling frame** – The MTR Consultant did a stakeholder mapping exercise as shown in Table 2 above and identified all relevant stakeholders to the project. All the identified stakeholders were covered by the data collection. However, not all project's activities have been implemented at the time of the MTR especially those related to the final selection of the 2500 farmer and implementation of the related project activities targeting those beneficiaries. Those project target farmer beneficiaries were not part of the current MTR and thus the MTR did not apply any sampling strategy to cover this group.
35. **Data sources** – the MTR consultant reviewed key project related documents; the country program framework, the project document, concept note, assessment, workplans, annual and quarterly reports and monitoring reports. The review of the project documentation served as the basis for preparing the MTR questions based on the OECD/ DAC criteria, the data collection strategy, and related data collection tools. Additionally, the MTR consultant collected primary data through key informant interviews (KIIs) and FGDs with the relevant project stakeholders.
36. **Stakeholder engagement** – stakeholders were selected based on being directly involved with project implementation. This included FAO team (Country Office), Project Implementation Unit (PMU), Local Project Implementation Unit (LPIU), Project Steering Committee (SC), Ministry of Environment (MoE), Ministry of Agriculture (MoA), Ministry of Water Resources (MoWR), Ministry of Agriculture National Centre for Water Resource Management, Muthanna Governorate, and Thi-Qar Governorate, Iraqi Farmer's Association. A total of 33 stakeholders

¹ UNEG. 2020. UNEG Ethical Guidelines for MTRs. Available at: <http://www.unMTR.org/document/detail/2866> UNEG. 2016. UNEG Norms and Standards for MTRs. Available at: <http://www.unMTR.org/document/detail/1914>

² Guide for planning and conducting mid-term reviews of FAO-GEF projects and programmes available at: www.fao.org/3/ca7788en/ca7788en.pdf

were consulted (see appendix 6 for a complete list of Key Informants engaged in the data collection).

37. **Composition of the MTR team** – The MTR team was composed of one international consultant. The international MTR consultant has 23 years of experience in conducting development evaluations and worked with different international aid agencies and UN organizations. He has previous experience in evaluating projects for the benefit of FAO and in Iraq. He worked in several countries in the region, and understands the institutional context, and can communicate in Arabic language directly with stakeholders.

1.6. *Limitations*

38. There were some limitations that were faced during the implementation of the MTR including:
- The evaluation was conducted remotely which limited the MTR consultant ability to directly observe any implementation of the project activities or assess challenges on the ground. The absence of being physically in Iraq challenged the ability of tracking the actual progress, engagement, implementation structures or the changing priorities of the government of Iraq.
 - The MTR evaluation team composition as per the TOR did not call for engaging a local consultant. This posed a challenge of speedy access to certain country related data or provide needed contextual inputs.
 - Conducting interviews and focus group discussions, remotely is more difficult than face to face in person interviews, leading to limited input from these key actors and potentially missing out on their perspectives and experiences.
39. To mitigate these challenges, the MTR consultant implemented the following measures:
- The MTR consultant did a stakeholder mapping to engage the largest number of stakeholders to validate the data and understand as much as possible the context and changing circumstances.
 - The MTR consultant fluently speaks the Arabic language which made the communication easy with the project stakeholders.
 - Engagement of the FAO-Iraq office was very important to provide the needed logistical support to ease access to the relevant stakeholders and project documents allowing the consultant to meet all stakeholders according to the agreed schedule.
 - The consultant used a powerful online platform "MS Teams" for remote communication with the ability to record meeting and focus groups when needed after receiving the proper consent.

2. Project background and context

40. **Project Title:** Sustainable Land Management for Improved Livelihoods in Degraded Areas of Iraq.
41. **Context:** Iraq is experiencing serious land degradation and desertification problems (affected around 92.5% of the country) because of a combination of factors, including the country's geographic position, overgrazing, unsustainable agricultural practices, limited precipitation, years of war and civil unrest and overexploitation of water resources and natural vegetation. Land degradation in the form of loss of vegetation cover, soil erosion, soil fertility loss, water pollution and salinization and sand mobilization are a direct consequence of mal-adaptive agricultural practices and over-exploitation of water resources. The marshland populations are among some of Iraq's most disadvantaged people. They depend on the marshland eco-services. Drought, water salinity and pollution are the major factors preventing Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs) from returning to their original communities. Iraq is one of the countries in the MENA region most vulnerable to climate change.³ The consequences include the loss of productive lands, the increase in sand dunes, diminishing forms of biota, increase in air pollution and sand movement, and increasing pressure on groundwater.
42. **Threats and Barriers being addressed by the project:** The Government of Iraq along with agricultural producers currently struggle to address the challenges of land degradation and adapting to climate change resulting in unsustainable agricultural and livestock production practices. The nation has limited capacity to identify, program, and incentivize the uptake of Sustainable Land Management (SLM) practices. This is particularly critical in areas associated with the globally significant southern marshlands which are severely threatened by unsustainable agriculture and livestock production. The project specifically aims to address four key barriers:
- *Barrier 1: The outdated regulatory and policy frameworks of Iraq do not coherently mainstream sustainable land management and ecosystem service maintenance.*
 - *Barrier 2: Farmer support systems do not have the capacity to identify and incentivize the adoption of SLM production practices.*
 - *Barrier 3: Farmer support systems do not have the capacity to identify and incentivize the adoption of SLM production practices relevant to the conservation of high-value wetlands ecosystems.*
 - *Barrier 4: Information and knowledge management systems required for informed decision-making and incentivize sustainable production practices regionally are inadequate.*
43. **Project Objectives and Components:** The objective of the project is to reverse land degradation processes, conserve and sustainably manage land and water resources in degraded marshland ecosystems in Southern Iraq for greater access to services from resilient ecosystems and improved livelihoods. The project has four components. The table below provides an overview of the project objectives, components, outcomes, and outputs as presented in the narrative text of the Project Document and the Results Matrix in Annex I of the Project Document. This overview was used as the basis for the Mid-Term Review and during the inception phase of the MTR.

³ Arab Forum for the Environment and Development (2009). Arab Environment: Climate Change Impact of Climate Change on Arab Countries. <http://www.afedonline.org/afedreport09/Full%20English%20Report.pdf>

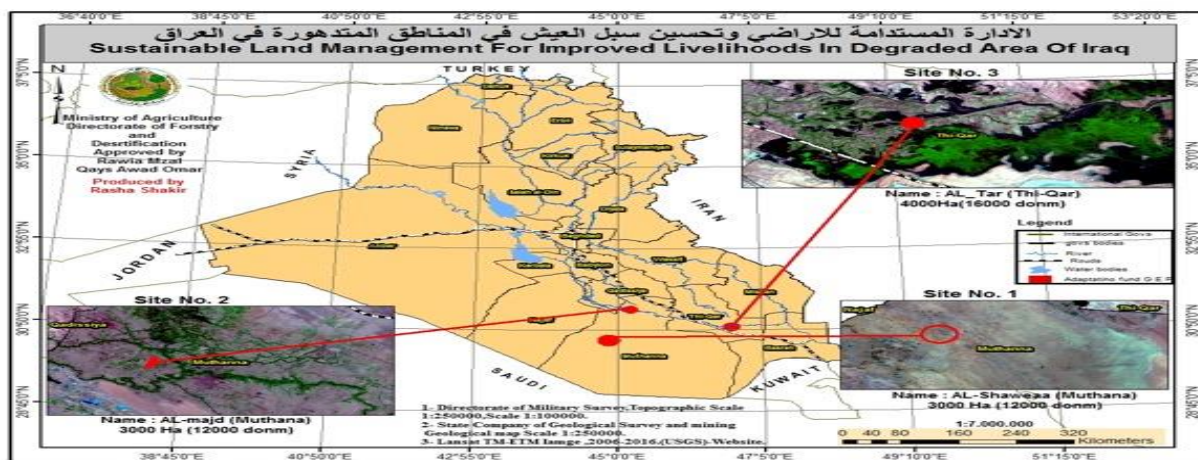
Table 3: Overview of project objectives and components

Project Objective:	Reverse land degradation processes, conserve and sustainably manage land and water resources in degraded marshland ecosystems in Southern Iraq for greater access to services from resilient ecosystems and improved livelihoods
Component 1:	Strengthen the enabling environment to support sustainable land management (SLM) and conservation agriculture (CA) in degraded marshland ecosystems in Iraq
Outcome:	1. Enhanced policy, legal and institutional frameworks in support of SLM and CA
Outputs:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1. Training and awareness raising toolkits on the potential benefits from SLM and CA technologies are prepared and disseminated at all levels. 1.2. A digital land use mapping system is established at Conservation Agriculture Department (CAD) at Ministry of Agriculture (MoA). 1.3. Marshland ecosystem value, status, and services are assessed, evaluated and documented using an integrated spatial information system hosted at Ministry of Environment (Mo&E). 1.4. A National cross-sector and multi-level SLM and CA strategy and action plan is developed.
Component 2:	Develop a range of technical options to identify, assess and adapt sustainable land management and conservation agriculture practices
Outcome:	2. SLM and CA best practices promoted to increase vegetation cover, improve soil fertility, productivity and reduce soil salinity in pilot production systems
Outputs:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2.1. Locally adapted SLM and CA best practices for cropping and farming systems are defined for a selection of pilot sites. 2.2. 500 employees from selected producer organizations and extension services are trained on integrated gender sensitive SLM and CA practices. 2.3. In pilot production systems, the technical and managerial capacities of at least 500 smallholders on SLM and CA practices and project monitoring is enhanced. 2.4. 50 (30 for Conservation Agriculture and 20 for Agroecology) Farmer Field School demonstration projects of SLM practices are implemented on 10,000 ha of government owned land. 2.5. 6,000 ha of small farms in drylands/ degraded agricultural lands are rehabilitated using innovative SLM and CA technologies/practices. 2.6. Business plans of at least 5 regional agricultural producer groups are developed to strengthen the marketing of CA products.
Component 3:	Restoration and sustainable management of marshland ecosystems through SLM, Agroecology (AE) and development of local communities' livelihoods
Outcome:	3.1. Measures to restore and sustainably manage marshland ecosystems are adopted
Outputs:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3.1.1. Awareness and capacity of local institutions and local communities on sustainable marshland management is strengthened. 3.1.2. A marshland restoration and management plan considering SLM and AE is established with participation of women and men.

	3.1.3. Marshland ecosystems and their services are restored and sustainably managed through SLM and AE practices increasing productivity in 5 pilot sites (4,000 ha)
Outcome:	3.2. Promotion of alternative income generating activities for local communities depending on marshland ecosystem services
Outputs:	3.2.1. A participatory, gender-sensitive and integrated strategy and action plan for marshland sustainable development designed. 3.2.2. Capacity on local business development, product eco-labeling and marketing, access to finance and market access promotion is enhanced. 3.2.3. Feasibility studies conducted on the conversion of conservation activities into marketable incomes in the selected marshlands. 3.2.4. At least 1 market plan to link traditional products from marshland ecosystems to the national market and the private sector agreed upon
Component 4:	Knowledge management, dissemination of lessons learned, monitoring and evaluation
Outcome:	Enhanced awareness on the importance of the conservation agriculture and marshland rehabilitation for SLM, and food security
Outputs:	4.1. Promotional material of CA and marshland management, innovations and practices, product information and labeling, elaborated and disseminate. 4.2. Best practices and knowledge analyzed, documented, published and shared. 4.3. Project M&E system established and provided timely information on project's outcomes and outputs progress including mid-term and final evaluation

44. **Project duration and dates:** 01 January 2020 – 01 January 2024 (4 years).
45. **GEF Project ID:** GCP/IRQ/003/GFF
46. **GEF focal area Strategic Objectives;** GEF 6 Land Degradation LD-1 Program 1: Maintain or improve flow of agro-ecosystem services to sustain food production and livelihoods.
47. **Executing Partners:** Ministry of Environment (MoE).
 - **Project Sites:** The project covers two governorates of Iraq; Muthanna governorate: (Al Salman district and Al-Rumaitha district (Al-Majid sub-district), and Thi-Qar governorate: 11 districts and 2 sub-districts, namely; Altar (Sub District), Al-Manar (Sub District), Germat Saeed (District), Al-Chibayish (District), Al-Eslah (District), Al Gharaf (District), Sikar(District), Shatra (District), Dawaya (District), Refaea (District), Al-Fajer (District), Al-Fhood (District) and Al-Nasir (District). The two governorates are already and will be even more severely subject to climate change risks in the form of frequent seasonal and yearly droughts, heat waves, sand-storms and associated land degradation and desertification, areas map is shown in figure 1 below.

Figure (1): Project sites



3. Theory of change

48. The Project's theory of change (TOC) describes and illustrates how and why a desired change was expected to occur in this context. This project's theory of change was based upon four integrated components designed to result in the achievement of the project objective. Each component is designed to catalyze and result in the transformations required to assist Iraq to move towards production modalities that support SLM as illustrated in Figure 2.
49. *The first component of the project* addresses the first barrier through assisting the Government to build the capacity required to support a comprehensive SLM program. The efforts will focus upon assisting the newly established Conservation Agriculture Directorate within the Ministry of Agriculture through the provision of the technical and catalytic support required to generate and implement a national agriculture SLM strategy and Agroecology and marshland conservation action plan. The strategy is expected to set in place the building blocks required to identify opportunities to enhance the ways the agriculture sector can improve production methods to drive forward SLM based production.
50. This component is expected to generate a strategic assessment and management plan focused upon the unique aspects related to the interface between agriculture and marshlands conservation. This action program will build upon and augment the more general national strategy. Building these capacities will assist national agencies and other stakeholders to provide a more strategic policy, funding, and capacity building efforts to the distinct needs of marshland associated agriculture interests. Moreover, this component will set in place a comprehensive digitalized national knowledge management and monitoring tool that would support the government of Iraq map land uses and assess, evaluate and document Marshland ecosystem value, status, and services.
51. The final outcome of this component will be a national institutional and management framework capable of moving forward a strategic SLM agenda which will be achieved through the following outputs:
 - I. Training and awareness raising toolkits on the potential benefits from SLM and CA technologies are prepared and disseminated at all levels.

- II. A digital land use mapping system is established at CAD at MoA.
 - III. Marshland ecosystem value, status, and services are assessed, evaluated and documented using an integrated spatial information system hosted at MoH&E;
 - IV. A National cross-sector and multi-level SLM strategy and Agroecology and Marshland Conservation action plan is developed.
52. *The second component* addresses the second barrier focusing energies and investments upon generating a platform for learning and building incentives for agriculturalists to gain exposure to and experience with more production practices that generate SLM benefits. The final outcome of this component will be the promotion of the SLM and CA best practices to increase vegetation cover, improve soil fertility, productivity and reduce soil salinity in pilot production systems that will deliver global environmental benefits across a wider landscape.
53. This will be achieved through the establishment of Farmer Field School (FFS) program targeting SLM that is supported by trained extension professionals with access to international best practices and awareness building materials. The FFS model developed by FAO has been highly effective particularly with building farmer skills to improve production and sustainability in dozens of countries. The project will build upon and expand this model for the purposes of building local community capacity to engage in and support agro-ecological and conservation practices at the landscape level. This component will start with an assessment and identification of best SLM practices that address threats within the target region. This will then move forward into the development of an FFS curriculum to teach these best practices and training programs to build the capacity of extension officers and others to implement the SLM focused FFS programs. Once these capacities are in place, the project will support the implementation of FFS programming across the governorates. This will include both a teaching element as well as demonstrations. Demonstrations will be designed to support agriculturalists to engage in improved practices by providing support to reduce perceived risks in adopting improved production while proving the social, economic, and ecological benefits of improved practices. These improvements will be linked to the component 1 knowledge management and monitoring platform equipped with CAD. In this way, a learning circle will exist with information being used for adapting lessons learned, and results distributed to farmers to provide them with information regarding what SLM improvement tools are most practical and suitable to particular locations and circumstances.
54. The project's theory of change under this component underlines that employing these improvements will serve to incentivize the uptake and amplification of SLM practices that deliver global environmental benefits across a wider landscape through the following outputs:
- I. Locally adapted SLM and CA best practices for cropping and farming systems are defined for a selection of pilot sites;
 - II. 50 Extension Officers from selected from the Government department/ministries for extension services are trained on integrated gender sensitive SLM through CA and Agroecology practices;
 - III. In pilot production systems, the technical and managerial capacities of at least 500 smallholders on SLM and CA practices and project monitoring is enhanced;
 - IV. 50 (30 for Conservation Agriculture and 20 for Agroecology) Farmer Field School demonstration projects of SLM practices are implemented on 10,000 ha of government owned land;
 - V. 6,000 ha of small farms in drylands/ degraded agricultural lands are rehabilitated using innovative SLM and CA technologies/practices;
 - VI. Business plans of at least 5 regional agricultural producer groups are developed to strengthen the marketing of CA products.

55. *The third component* will address barrier 3 through assessing opportunities, identifying a suite of best practices to apply, generating FFS curriculum, training extension officers and others to use this curriculum, applying the curriculum to support agricultural improvements, and monitoring these improvements to inform national and governorate level applications. This component will focus these efforts upon the unique circumstances and challenges associated with agricultural production most closely associated with and impacting the globally significant southern marshlands. Two main outcomes will result from this component, the first outcome will be the adoption of measures to restore and sustainably manage marshland ecosystems, this will be through achieving the following outputs:
- I. Awareness and capacity of local institutions and local communities on sustainable marshland management is strengthened;
 - II. A marshland restoration and management plan considering SLM and CA is established with participation of women and men;
 - III. Marshland ecosystems and their services are restored and sustainably managed through SLM and CA practices increasing productivity in 5 pilot sites (4,000 ha).
56. The second outcome of this component will be the promotion of alternative income generating activities for local communities depending on marshland ecosystem services, this will be achieved through achieving the following outputs:
- I. A participatory, gender-sensitive and integrated strategy and action plan for marshland sustainable development designed;
 - II. Capacity on local business development, product eco-labeling and marketing, access to finance and market access promotion is enhanced;
 - III. Feasibility studies conducted on the conversion of conservation activities into marketable incomes in the selected marshlands;
 - IV. At least 1 market plan to link traditional products from marshland ecosystems to the national market and the private sector agreed upon.
57. *The project's fourth component* will address the fourth barrier. This component will be closely aligned with the information and management programming set in place under the first component. This component will make certain that lessons learned by this project are magnified regionally. Through this component, monitoring and reporting will capture best practices and feed these into regional and international forums to make certain results help to inform international efforts to identify best practices for the delivery of SLM and associated global environmental benefits. This will include linkages to international information delivery mechanisms such as FAO's WOCAT database and regional SLM network.
58. This component will result in an outcome of enhanced awareness on the importance of the conservation agriculture and marshland rehabilitation for SLM, and food security through achieving the following outputs:
- I. Promotional material of CA and marshland management, innovations and practices, product information and labeling, elaborated and disseminated;
 - II. Best practices and knowledge analyzed, documented, published, and shared;
 - III. Project M&E system established and provided timely information on project's outcomes and outputs progress including mid-term and final MTR.

Figure (2): The Project's Theory of Change ToC



4. Key findings and MTR questions

MTR question 1 -Relevance

59. **Finding 1.1.** All stakeholders interviewed by the MTR consultant see the Project as highly relevant to their key development concerns and to *sustainably manage globally significant ecosystems, combat land degradation and conserve marshland ecosystems in Iraq for improved livelihoods and ecosystem resilience, services, and access*. Stakeholders displayed strong feelings of ownership and have articulated ideas on how this project will contribute to develop national capacities of the organizations responsible for sustainable land management which will in turn help them in developing and implementing conservation agriculture, agroecology and sustainable livelihood practices and systems.
60. The challenges identified at the project design stage which the project was designed to address are still valid. According to a UN Iraq press release in the world desertification day, Iraq is among the top 5 countries most affected by climate change, and the 39th most water stressed. Last year's record low rainfall – the second driest season in 40 years – has led to water shortages, desertification, and soil erosion due to unsustainable agricultural practices and shrinking, degraded vegetation cover. The press release stated that a 2021 survey, covering 7 governorates, found 37% of wheat farmers and 30% of barley farmers suffered crop failure⁴. A recent report published by IOM in 2022⁵ stated that at the end of 2021, IOM recorded approximately 20,000 people displaced due to water scarcity (looking at only 10 of Iraq's 19 governorates), high salinity, and poor water quality across Iraq, while a 2021 study by the Norwegian Refugee Council found that in drought-affected areas, 1 in 15 households had a family member forced to migrate in search of work. As environmental changes intensify, displacement is likely to increase exponentially. The IOM Climate Vulnerability Assessment⁶ in 2023 found that climate change and environmental degradation have contributed to the displacement of at least 55,290 individuals in IOM assessed locations in central and southern Iraq between January 2016 and October 2022. This represents an estimated 13 per cent of the original population that used to reside in these locations. Therefore, the MTR assessed the relevance of the SLMILDA project as **Highly Satisfactory**.

MTR question 2 -Coherence

61. **Finding 2.1.** The project design is Coherent with Government policies. Government implementing agencies at all levels (central, and local) all judge the Project to be highly coherent with Government development goals and policies. More specifically these include:
- *The National Strategy for Poverty Reduction in Iraq 2009*, where the development of the agriculture sector is the core of this strategy since poverty is largely a rural phenomenon. The project contributes to the following objectives of the strategy: 1) a better living environment for the poor, and 2) higher income for the poor from work.
 - *The Iraq National Development Plan (2013-2017)*, where the role of Agriculture and water Resources in development is highly emphasized through the provision investment impetus to selected sectoral growth poles, including agriculture, to raise its share of GDP generation. The project objectives are well aligned with the Plan's objectives.
 - *Agriculture for Development in Iraq.* It estimated the impacts of achieving the agricultural targets of the National Development Plan 2013-2017 on economic growth, incomes, and

⁴ [On World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought, UN and NGOs call for action to support Iraq in managing water and adapting to climate change | United Nations in Iraq](#)

⁵ *Migration, Environment, and Climate Change in Iraq*. IOM Iraq. 2022. Iraq. <https://iraq.un.org/en/194355-migration-environment-and-climate-change-iraq>

⁶ IOM. IOM IRAQ 1 DRIVERS OF CLIMATE-INDUCED DISPLACEMENT in IRAQ: CLIMATE VULNERABILITY ASSESSMENT KEY FINDINGS. 2023.

gender equality. It is widely believed that the country's agricultural potential is great, and might help accelerate economy wide growth, raise household incomes, and affect the household income distribution in Iraq. The project is perfectly aligned with the Plan and supports its implementation. Components 2 and 3 of the project will contribute to the implementation of the proposed programmes in the plan.

- *The National Strategic Plan for Combating Desertification (NSPCD), and the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (2015-2020)*, which have established a national coordination mechanism, supported by the Ministries of Environment, Agriculture, and Water Resources. The Project intervention area includes smallholders and marshland areas in middle and southern Iraq that have a high number of vulnerable farmer communities. This project will directly contribute to the implementation of a set of measures proposed by the Strategy to rehabilitate the marshlands and preserves its significant biodiversity ecosystems.
- *The Land Degradation Neutrality Targets*. In 2016, Iraq committed itself to set national LDN targets and joined the Programme that provides opportunities to foster coherence, move from pilots to scale and identify transformative projects. Part of this project design was to support Iraq in setting its LDN targets, as it will generate information and data on two of the three LDN indicators (namely, land cover and land productivity).
- The Nationally determined contributions of Iraq (NDC)⁷. These Nationally Determined Contributions is a nationwide sectoral document aiming at representing Iraq's supreme policy in dealing with the problem of climate change. The NDC focuses on the period 2021-2030 and sets its commitments towards supporting the most affected sectors in Iraq by the climate change, one of which is the agriculture sector. The NDC document comprehensive goal for the agriculture sector is to help eliminate hunger and malnutrition the document focuses on increasing the resilience of the agricultural sector towards climate change. To make agriculture more productive and sustainable, the NDC proposes to reduce soil degradation and increase agricultural revenues, also to achieve economic diversification and reduce poverty level. More inclusive agricultural systems can be achieved by supporting rural women using modern technologies.

62. **Finding 2.2.** The project design is coherent with GEF land degradation LD-1 and with two GEF financed project and implemented in Iraq. The project's intended outcomes are congruent with GEF focal areas/operational programme strategies, namely the Land Degradation LD-1 Program 1: Maintain or improve flow of agro-ecosystem services to sustain food production and livelihoods. The project will contribute to Outcomes 1.1) Improved agricultural, rangeland and pastoral management; and 1.2) functionality and cover of agro-ecosystems maintained. As for the other GEF Financed Initiatives. The project is designed to enhance and generate synergies with Iraq's current portfolio of GEF investments:

- *Establishing a Functional Environmental Information System for the Synergistic Implementation of Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEA's) for Iraq (UNEP/GEF) (PIF Approved)*. This project was approved for implementation on 22 March 2018 one year before the implementation of SLIMIDA on 3 April 2019. This project's objective is to enhance capacity of Iraq for monitoring and reporting on multi-lateral environment agreements through a functional environment information system. This includes streamlined and integrated data and information systems at the national level that take into consideration the decentralized governance system in Iraq for use in decision-making, planning and reporting. The project also intends to improve results based regulatory monitoring which aligns well with the SLMILDA project.

⁷ Iraq Ministry of Environment, Nationally Determined Contributions of Iraq (NDC), 2020, [Iraq First NDC \(fao.org\)](http://fao.org)

- *Initial steps for the establishment of the national protected areas network Project:* (UNEP/GEF). This project started on 9 August 2017 and concluded on 31 March 2023. The objective of this medium sized GEF project was to develop and start implementation the plan for the establishment of a national Network of Protected Areas. The project was scheduled for completion by 2019. The project was working to two protected areas as pilot sites with a focus on provision of essential infrastructure and support to the selected Protected Areas. The SLMILDA project supports the Iraqi biodiversity efforts by rehabilitating critical marsh ecosystems, including the Dalmaj marshland. A partnership is being promoted with this existing GEF-UNEP project to build on its lesson learnt and findings, informing selection for demonstration sites and selection of target communities.
 - The project is coherent with other efforts that aim to reduce vulnerability to the negative impacts of climate change. Iraq is currently implementing the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) Readiness project funded by Green Climate Fund (GCF), that aims to strengthen institutional capacity to support decision-makers with climatic projections, scenarios, risk assessment and data. This will further enable institutions and decision-makers to integrate medium to long-term adaptation actions into national development planning in Iraq. This project is a three-year project that was launched in September 2020.
63. **Finding 2.3.** The design of the project is coherent with FAO Strategic Objectives and priorities. The Project design contributes directly to the FAO's Strategic Framework and Strategic Objective SO2 "Increase and improve provision of goods and services from agriculture, forestry and fisheries in a sustainable manner" and Strategic Objective 5 "Increase the resilience of livelihoods from disaster". Additionally, it contributes to the FAO's Iraq Country Programming Framework Priority Areas: (B) Building up the investment projects portfolio for agricultural development; (C) Technical assistance, normative work and guidance on subsector and cross cutting themes and issues.
64. Based on the above analysis, the MTR found the coherence and complementarity of the SLMILDA project with both the Government of Iraq's stated goals and other actors' interventions in the same context programs running on Sustainable Land Management as **Highly Satisfactory.**

MTR question 3 -Effectiveness

65. **Finding 3.1.** The Project's Strategic Results Matrix was well designed and commensurate with the components of the project, reflecting the activities to be carried out within each of these components. The matrix also included indicators of the objectives that the project seeks to achieve in a way that reflects the baselines and targets. However, some of these indicators at the outcome level did not include base line and target values.
66. In principle, the MTR assesses the likelihood that the project will make a substantive contribution to the longer-term intended changes and impacts as presented in the reconstructed Theory of Change. The likelihood of impact being achieved in the future is assessed based on the internal logic of the project, the assessment of effectiveness, and verification of drivers and assumptions. As no outputs have been achieved and there is thus no progress towards outcomes, there has been no progress towards achieving long-term results and impact until now.

67. **Finding 3.2** on Component 1: Strengthen the enabling environment to support sustainable land management (SLM) and conservation agriculture (CA) in degraded marshland ecosystems in Iraq. The project team finalized and had an approved training Curricula for Decision and Policy Makers on Sustainable Land Management. The main objective of curricula's is to assist the government and farmer representatives in SLM to design and promote informed decision-making able to support adaptation and incentivize uptake of best agricultural practices.
68. A total of 103 personnel were nominated as Decision and Policy Makers from the Iraq Ministry of Agriculture, Conservation Agriculture Directorate, Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Water Resources to participate in the planned training on Sustainable Land Management Policy Decision making, Policy enactment and implementation. Recruitment of an Expert Trainer to train selected participants on Policy and Decision Making in SLM is in progress.
69. The project team developed a training curriculum on conservation agriculture CA practices. Recruitment of an Expert Trainer to train selected participants from farmers on CA practices was done. 60 Extension Officers from the MoA were trained on Conservation Agriculture practices and farmer Field School approach. The trained Extension Officers now serve as Lead facilitators of Farmer Field School on Demonstration Plots of CA where, targeted farmers will converge now and then as a "Look and Learn Centre" for farmer training on CA and related agribusiness of CA products.
70. The project team developed Terms of Reference for an expert on Natural Resources Management and Policy Making and the recruitment process is in progress. This expert will facilitate the planned workshops to develop a National Sustainable Land Management Strategy and an Action plan for Agroecology and Marshland Conservation in Iraq. The strategy and action plan once developed will focus primarily upon improving the management of currently degraded productive landscapes that have an indirect impact upon wetlands conservation.
71. The project team developed Terms of Reference to identify and select a third-party organisation to establish a Knowledge Management Platform where Sustainable Land Management information system derived through GIS and Remote Sensing Techniques will be uploaded and disseminated as a living platform sharing Sustainable Land Management information across Iraq and the region.
72. A national geographic information system specialist based in Basra has been recruited to support the project knowledge management system for which the TOR is developed but the procurement process did not start yet. This system when procured will serve as a tool to assist farmers, extension officers, and government agencies to make informed decisions regarding the application of best SLM practices through the timely dissemination of data and information on SLM pertaining to climate change and its impact to agriculture, extent of combating land degradation, irrigation and water resources management, evaporation, groundwater use, crop production levels, run-off, efficiency, and pollution loads.
73. So far, the MTR found that some activities that would lead to the achievement of the outputs have been implemented. None of the outputs as described in the Project's RF have been realized.

74. The MTR found that the project to reach its objectives needs to accelerate the implementation of this component. MTR judges progress in component 1 so far as **Moderately Unsatisfactory**.
75. **Finding 3.3** on Component 2: Develop a range of technical options to identify, assess and adapt sustainable land management and conservation agriculture practices. According to project progress reports, 60 Government Extension Officers were selected and trained in Conservation Agriculture for improved Sustainable Land Management and mandated in both governorates, out of which 30 (2 Females and 28 Males) in Thi Qar and 30 (11 Females and 19 Males) in Muthanna. The project team achieved 20% more value than what was proposed in the original project document -50 extension officers. However, no extension officers are trained on Agroecology and Marshland Conservation, plans are in place to train the same 60 government extension officers on this topic. The development of a training curriculum on Agroecology and Marshland Conservation is at draft stage where the curriculum is under review by FAO's technical experts of LTO and NSP.
76. The project progress reports showed that out of the planned 45 Farmer Field School Demonstration Plots for Conservation Agriculture, 36 Demonstration Plots were identified (80%), whereas, out of the planned 25 Farmer Field School Demonstration Plots for Agroecology, 22 Demonstration Plots were identified (88%).
77. With only one output fully achieved so far and two outputs in progress out of six outputs. The MTR judges the progress in component 2 so far as **Moderately Unsatisfactory**.
78. **Finding 3.4** on Component 3: Restoration and sustainable management of marshland ecosystems through SLM, Agroecology (AE) and development of local communities' livelihoods. The MTR team noticed weak progress in the implementation of the activities under this component. This weak progress is the result of the weak progress in the implementation of the activities under the component 2. Most of the activities under this component are a follow-up to component 2, and these activities cannot be implemented before the full implementation of the activities under component 2.
79. The delays in the selection and training of extension officers and building their capacities to establish and implement the FFS program on the ground, start farming activities and agricultural operations, apply the acquired knowledge of the sustainable land management and transfer it to the farmers. This was coupled with the low progress in the identification of demonstration plots for both for Conservation Agriculture and Agroecology which made the progress in component 3 cease.
80. Although none of the outputs of component 3 are realized, some progress toward the achievement is observed. The procurement of agricultural inputs (vegetable seeds, fruits and forest tree seedlings and organic fertilizers) for the 25 Farmer Field School Demonstration Plots under Agroecology is in progress (22 plots are identified so far). This procurement is a preparatory step for crop planting that is planned to begin in mid-year 2023 in line with the local crop calendar. The achievement of this activity is subject to finalize the selection of the remaining plots and the internal approval of the training curriculum on Agroecology and Marshland Conservation Agricultural inputs for FFS demonstration plots under Agroecology are being procured. So far, the Technical Specifications to initiate the procurement of agricultural inputs for FFS demonstration plots under Agroecology (vegetable seeds, seedlings

of fruit and fodder trees) have been cleared by the FAO Technical experts LTO and NSP.

81. The project team finalized beneficiary verification and selection of 2500 farming households across the project locations to facilitate the training of these beneficiaries by the Government Extension Officers covering topics on Sustainable Land Management. Additionally, there is some evidence that a plan was developed to roll out the FFS with farmers during the coming few months.
82. With some activities to achieve the outputs under component three are implemented so far, the MTR judges the progress in component 3 as **Moderately Unsatisfactory**.
83. **Finding 3.5** on Component 4: Knowledge management, dissemination of lessons learned, monitoring and evaluation.
84. The MTR found evidence that six national consultants were employed across the project locations, three men and three women who are responsible for collecting data on natural resources, social and economic status of the community and farmers.
85. The project team has set a plan to conduct GIS tools training sessions during the coming six months, with support from FAO Iraq Country staff and hired consulting company to set up the Knowledge Management Platform.
86. Interviews with stakeholders held during the MTR revealed that not all members of the LPIU, and the Project Steering Committee have the same level of understanding and knowledge of the project and its activities, and the level of implementation progress.
87. The MTR judges the progress in component 4 as **Unsatisfactory**.
88. The four components are not of equal importance. The financial allocations for the four components represent 13.7%, 56.1%, 19.3%, and 6.1% respectively of the overall project budget. Since Component 2 consists of the core activities that will lead to achieve the project's objectives. The performance of the project under component 2 is moderately unsatisfactory. As this component carries so much more weight than the others, the MTR judges the overall effectiveness of the SLMILDA project so far to be **Moderately Unsatisfactory**.
89. The moderately unsatisfactory Project implementation progress was the result of many challenges at the ground. The project was approved on 3 April 2019 which after its few months of mobilization the COVID-19 outbreak affected the country with restricted movement imposed for most of 2020/21. Furthermore, although the elections in Iraq were held in October 2021, the political situation was volatile until recently, and the project's communication channels were a major challenge which affected the establishment of the Project's Steering Committees and PMU.
90. The National Project Steering Committee was set up and the first Steering Committee meeting was only held on 24 August 2021, more than two years after the Project's approval. The National Project Management Unit (PMU) and the LPIU were developed afterwards as these two units were established to manage the national project. PMU meetings were held during the period September-December 2022. Subsequent LPIU meetings were held at each of the two Governorates (Thi Qar on December,13, 2022 and Muthanna on December 11, 2022) to

plan the implementation of the project.

91. All these delays in the project implementation arrangements (more than two years for the Project Steering Committee and more than three years for the first meeting of the PMU and LPIU), highly affected the project implementation progress and halted any progress.

MTR question 4 -Efficiency

92. **Finding 4.1.** The project is well behind its implementation schedule and there are major delays in the delivery of the project activities. These delays were caused by several factors as stated previously under points 65 and 66 above including the political instability of the country which negatively impacted the communication with the local authorities, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic with restricted movement imposed for most of 2020/21, and the late approval from the Government of Iraq on the project's sites selected to implement the project especially in Thi-Qar governorate.
93. **Finding 4.2.** The delays have led to a situation where the project is unlikely to achieve its goals within the present timeframe. For the project to make up for the lost time in implementation that was mainly caused by circumstances beyond the control of the project management, the project needs to be given an extension **to make up for the delays in the delivery of field activities**. As the project has been underspending, there is enough budget left to consider a no-cost extension. The MTR judgement on timeliness is therefore **Moderately Unsatisfactory**.
94. **Finding 4.3.** Cost-effectiveness. As few activities have been implemented and the evidence triangulated from the different data sources clearly shows that the project achievements were minimal. While the table below shows that the project expenses reached almost 25% of the approved budget. However, the way the resources have been spent is satisfactory based on the activities implemented. Therefore, the project's cost-effectiveness is found as **Satisfactory**.

Table 4 : Expenditure summary

Component/ Expenditure	Expenditure Year 1 -2020	Expenditure Year 2 -2021	Expenditure Year 3 -2022	Expenditure Year 4 -2023	Total \$
Component 1	33,026	40,000	47,600	80,000	200,626
Component 2	10,000	90,000	110,000	260,000	470,000
Component 3	-	46,000	60,000	181,000	287,000
Component 4	-	20,000	21,000	40,000	81,000
PMC	-	61,209	-	-	61,209
Total	43,026	257,209	238,600	561,000	1,099,835

MTR question 5 –Sustainability

95. **Finding 5.1.** The MTR found that the executing partners (ministry of agriculture and ministry of Environment (MoE) did not yet obtain the capacities to undertake all project activities. The interviews conducted by the MTR consultant indicated that they need technical and coordination support as well as trainings from FAO. While the project design is built on sustaining the project outputs through capacity building and institutional development, most

of the outputs are not achieved yet. However, establishing a project national steering committee, national PMU and LPIUs would positively affect sustaining the project outputs when realized. Additionally, training extension officers from the MoA on CA and Agroecology would sustain these capacities within the government of Iraq. Therefore, the MTR judges the sustainability of the SLMILDA project so far as **Moderately Likely**.

MTR question 6 – Factors affecting performance

96. **Finding 6.1.** The MTR found the overall project performance as unsatisfactory so far. The MTR rated the different criteria based on evidence triangulated from different sources on the project achievement of its intended outputs. This performance was affected by different external factors including the exceptional circumstances related to the COVID19 pandemic which coincided with the start of the project, as well as the political instability in the country that lasted for few years during the project implementation.
97. **Finding 6.2 Project design.** The project design was very elaborated and followed the requirements of GEF. The Project's Theory of Change was well structured to achieve the Project's objective to reverse land degradation processes, conserve and sustainably manage land and water resources in degraded marshland ecosystems in Southern Iraq for greater access to services from resilient ecosystems and improved livelihoods. This was highly articulated through addressing the main challenges and barriers the country faces. Thus, the MTR marks the project design as **Highly Satisfactory**.
98. **Finding 6.3 Quality of project execution and management arrangements (including assessment of risks):** The MTR found that the project currently is being managed by a PMU established at FAO Iraq office. Project monitoring is carried out by the Project Management Unit (PMU) and the FAO budget holder. Project performance is monitored using the project results matrix, including indicators (baseline and targets) and annual work plans and budgets. The PMU prepared two annual Project Implementation Reports (PIRs), periodic backstopping and supervision missions. The PMU is currently having three full time experts running the project. The national structures that were proposed to help mobilize and implement the project were not established until recently (September-December 2022 for the National PMU and LPIU), The establishment of the mechanisms to manage and mobilize the project were delayed and affected its implementation. The MTR through KIIs found some evidence that the establishment of these mechanisms helped the project to gain its recent momentum. Some of the risks that may impede the achievement of the results and should be considered include:
- Stakeholder Engagement: Lack of active and continued participation and collaboration among stakeholders, including local communities, government agencies at the national and local level, and implementing partners, may impede the project's progress.
 - Political Challenges: Iraq's political situation may present risks to the project's implementation. Political instability can disrupt operations, delay activities, or create an unfavorable environment for project success.
 - Institutional Capacity: institutional capacity challenges within national and local government bodies can undermine project implementation. Insufficient technical expertise, limited coordination, and inadequate governance structures may hinder the achievement of project goals.
99. Therefore, the MTR judges the quality of the project execution and management arrangements so far as **Moderately Satisfactory**.

100. **Finding 6.4 project oversight by FAO as the GEF Agency and national partners: FAO Iraq country office representative was present in the Steering Committee, and the Local Project Implementation Units' meetings to provide oversights and discuss challenges faced the project implementation at all levels. While national bodies to oversee the project implementation were not established until recently, the Steering Committee for the project was established on August 2021 and only one Steering Committee meeting was held since then., The MTR found that the establishment of the national oversight mechanisms was delayed and the frequency of its meetings to provide the required oversight of the implementation and the timely and effective response to solve project implementation obstacles is still needs improvement. Therefore, the MTR judges the performance of the oversight mechanisms so far as **Moderately Satisfactory**.**
101. **Finding 6.3 Co-financing.** The project document projected a co-financing arrangement where the investment from GEF of US\$ 3.549 million would be complemented by another US\$ 21.2 million co-financing from three other sources; US\$ 17.5 million (in-kind) from the Government of Iraq, US\$ 2,5 million (grant) from FAO, and US\$ 1.2 million (grant) from USAID and Coca-Cola (WADA). The MTR could not find evidence on the materialized co-financing from the Government of Iraq. In practice, there is still a large gap and room for improvement in the commitment of the Government of Iraq's to co-finance project implementation activities where the lack of financial support in the form of co-financing from the Government of Iraq remains a challenge. MTR judges the co-financing under this project as **Moderately Unsatisfactory**.
102. **Finding 6.4 Partnerships and stakeholder engagement.** The MTR collected evidence that showed a shortage in regular coordination/communication between central level authorities and between central and local authorities. The set up of the National Project Steering Committee was delayed due to the long process of nominating the committee's members. Since the start of the project in January 2020, one meeting of the Project Steering Committee was conducted and it was conducted after more than one year of the start of project implementation in August 2021.
103. Additionally, only one PMU meeting and two LPIU committee meetings were held (September-December 2022), however these meetings although minimal were instrumental in discussing project implementation hindrances and accelerating the implementation of some of the project activities.
104. Project stakeholders were properly identified during the project design phase. However, the evidence collected by the MTR consultant through KIIs found that the project partners were not well engaged with the project. In some cases, stakeholders were not aware of the project progress as they had not been involved during the few activities that were implemented so far. However, the stakeholders involved in the key informant interviews acknowledged the importance of the project and its relevance to the country's identified priorities.
105. The MTR judges the Partnerships and stakeholder engagement as **Moderately Unsatisfactory**.
106. **Finding 6.5 Communication and knowledge management.** No (public) communication and awareness raising activities have been implemented yet and therefore it is too early to assess any influence of the project on attitudes and behaviors. As the project did not yet achieve any

of the anticipated results, the MTR was not able to collect any evidence to judge how the communication and awareness raising activities are likely to support the sustainability and scaling up of project results. Several stakeholders interviewed during the MTR mission stated that awareness raising is very important and should start as soon as possible. Additionally, it was noted from the evidence collected through KIs that the project stakeholders were not fully aware of the implemented activities or the status of the project which shows that the project fell short in communicating and sharing knowledge with the relevant stakeholders. The MTR judges the Communication and knowledge management as **Unsatisfactory**.

107. **Finding 6.6 Monitoring and evaluation design.** The project document has a results matrix that specifically set the project indicators, their baseline values and the anticipated Mid Term and End of the project targets that guides the monitoring of the project. The project monitoring is conducted through the Project Implementation Review (PIR) reports. The project team is responsible for producing these reports annually. These reports include progress against implementation and updates to the list of indicators and the tracking tables. These reports are shared with the evaluation officer at FAO-Iraq office and the analysis of the results are communicated to the management. The project so far did not develop any field-based impact monitoring or co financing report. Recently, the project team started reporting on the quarter indicators of GEF. As for the evaluation, the project M&E plan includes a mid-term review and a final evaluation. The current MTR is implemented as part of this set plan. MTR judges Monitoring and evaluation design and activities of the Project as **Moderately Satisfactory**.

108. Overall, the MTR judges factors affecting performance of the SLMILDA project as **Moderately Unsatisfactory**.

MTR question 7 – Cross-cutting dimensions (including gender and ESS)

109. **Finding 7.1 Gender and disadvantaged vulnerable people.** Gender and social analysis were undertaken during the Project Preparation Grant PPG phase with involvement of a national expert. The results formed the basis for appropriate plans, activities, monitoring, and safeguards to be defined in the project document. The project addressed well this dimension through integrating sex disaggregated indicators within its Strategic Results Matrix (Annex 1 of the Project Document), and those indicators are monitored and reported as per the plan.

110. Moreover, the project focuses on the need to build capacities of both stakeholders and the beneficiaries in areas related to gender. This was evidenced through allocating financial resources within its Results Based Budget (Annex 3 of the Project Document) to recruit international and national expertise to implement thematic training seminars one of which is on gender.

111. The project targets smallholders and marshland areas in middle and southern Iraq that have a high number of vulnerable farmer communities and specifically targets equal number of women and men beneficiaries in these areas. However, the evidence fell short in supporting the actual implementation of the activities targeting these beneficiaries (so far only preliminary lists of farmer households have been prepared that should be finalized, verified and 2500 farming households selected across the project locations in cooperation of the M&E department at FAO Iraq). Based on that, the MTR judges this dimension to be **Moderately Satisfactory**.

112. **Finding 7.2 Environmental and Social Safeguards (ESS).** Environmental and Social Management Assessment has been identified in annex 5 of the Project Document. The project is classified of low Environmental and Social risk. The project follows FAO's Environmental and Social Standards. The project integrated a grievance mechanism based on FAO's grievance mechanism to ensure that appropriate mechanisms are in place to allow individuals and communities to contact FAO directly and file a complaint if they believe they are or might be adversely affected by the project not complying with FAO's Environmental and Social Standards. Moreover, part of the project team's responsibilities was to monitor the implementation of the plan for social and environmental safeguards, in accordance with the FAO Environmental and Social Safeguards. MTR marks this dimension of the SLMILDA project as **Moderately Satisfactory**.

113. The overall judgement of the MTR on cross-cutting dimensions is **Moderately Satisfactory**.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

5.1. Conclusions

114. **Conclusion 1 (Relevance): The project aligns strategically with national priorities, donor strategic priorities, existing interventions, and the FAO strategic Framework and the FAO Country Programming Framework. The project design was well-received, and key stakeholders confirmed the continued relevance of the project and its activities for the country.**

115. The MTR determined that the project remains highly relevant and exhibits complementarity with existing interventions and projects. The project is coherent with the Government's environmental policies. Despite implementation challenges, the project design's relevance remains highly satisfactory.

116. **Conclusion 2 (Effectiveness): As so few activities were implemented and some outputs were achieved but with no outcomes yet observed, it was difficult to assess most of the criteria for this MTR.** The MTR rated the different criteria based on factual implementation status and took into consideration the exceptional circumstances related to the COVID19 pandemic, the political instability the country went through, the modest level of coordination between central level authorities and between central and local authorities, as well as the momentum the project is currently gaining.

117. Despite limited implementation progress, the project is making some headway, but progress remains unsatisfactory. **Most key output targets are yet to be met. To achieve sustainable results, the project will require an extension of at least two years, which is feasible with the remaining budget.**

118. Overall, the project's progress assessment is moderately unsatisfactory, considering the lack of output and outcome achievements. However, the MTR team recognizes a progress in implementing some of the project activities and the project is gaining momentum. If granted an extension until at least January 2026, it is likely that the project will reach its main targets and outputs.

119. **Conclusion 3 (Efficiency): Project implementation faced hindrances from the COVID-19 lockdown and political instability, which negatively impacted communication with local authorities and delayed implementation. Despite some delivered outputs, no observed outcomes, and limited progress toward objectives, the project will not realize its expected results if the project ends as initially planned on January 2024.**
120. Timeliness suffered from a lengthy start-up period with little on-ground action. Timeliness has improved significantly over the past year, but the project still needs to make up for lost time. **The way the resources have been spent is satisfactory based on the activities implemented.**
121. **Conclusion 4 (Sustainability): Assessing all sustainability aspects of the project was not possible for the MTR due to limited project activities. However, the Project Document addressed sustainability through capacity building and government stakeholder engagement, knowledge sharing, and ensuring positive impacts on beneficiaries' lives and livelihoods. Overall, the sustainability of the SLMILDA project as judged through the design is moderately satisfactory.**
122. **Conclusion 5 (Factors affecting progress): The project design was comprehensive and aligned with GEF requirements. The Theory of Change effectively addressed the challenges and barriers faced by the country, aiming to reverse land degradation, conserve resources, and improve livelihoods.**
123. There is still a large gap and room for improvement in the commitment of the Government of Iraq's to co-finance project implementation activities. One of the main agreements during the National Project Steering Committee meetings was the promotion and commitment of co-finance obligations from the Government of Iraq through the Ministry of Environment and other ministries. However, the lack of financial support in the form of co-financing from the Government of Iraq remains a challenge.
124. The establishment of the national project management units PMU and the LPIU across the national structure all the way to the grassroots Governorate field level were delayed and thus delayed the project implementation. However, the recent establishment of these structures cleared and reduced bottlenecks and shortcomings in project implementation. With such structural units in place and subsequent meetings held, the onset of the year 2023 recorded positive efforts to collaborate with the key Government ministries that began to be more responsive in their participation in the implementation of the project.
125. The MTR identified a lack of regular coordination and communication between central and local authorities. The establishment of the National Project Steering Committee was delayed, hindering effective engagement. Some stakeholders were unaware of the project's progress due to limited implementation. However, stakeholders acknowledged the project's importance and relevance.
126. Overall, the MTR found the project's performance on factors affecting performance as **Moderately Unsatisfactory.**
127. **Conclusion 6 (Cross-cutting dimensions, including gender and ESS):** The project activities that have been implemented so far addressed the gender dimension (training was inclusive of

both genders) and the project implementation monitoring reports included reporting on sex disaggregated indicators. The project’s design results framework contains specific indicators that will make certain that the project is engaged with stakeholders effectively and with women as shown by gender specific indicators in the results framework. The project was designed to reduce the impact of land degradation on women and other particularly vulnerable groups, when implemented, the project is expected to contribute to women’s empowerment and gender equality since 50% of the project target beneficiaries are set by the project design to be women. However, since the project progress is till stagnant, no evidence was available to help verify the achievement of these targets.

128. The entire design of the project is based in the concept of addressing the land degradation and to increase production and productivity, address climate change, biodiversity and environmental degradation in agriculture. The project provides the catalytic investment required to establish a new pathway for conserving landscapes where environmental and agricultural concerns intersect.

129. Overall, the MTR found the project’s performance on cross-cutting dimensions by the project design as **Moderately Satisfactory**.

130. Overall, the conclusion of the MTR is that SLMILDA project had an unfortunate start. It is improving steadily but its performance is still **Moderately Unsatisfactory**. It is a highly relevant project, so it is important to try to achieve its expected outputs. The project is moving in the right direction but should be given time to address the issues identified in this MTR.

5.2. Recommendations

131. The MTR has come up with following recommendations, the rationale for each recommendation, responsible party, and the time frame for implementation as illustrated in table 5 below:

Table 5 : Recommendations

Recommendation 1 (Effectiveness)	The MTR recommends a No Cost extension of the project until January 2026, to make it possible for the project team and the executing partners to achieve the project outputs and outcomes.
Rationale for recommendation	<p>The political instability of the country from 2019 to 2021 negatively impacted the communication with the local authorities and this delayed project implementation. The project implementation progress was further derailed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic with restricted movement imposed in much of 2020/21. Furthermore, even though the elections were held in October 2021, the political situation was still volatile, and the project communication channels remained a major challenge.</p> <p>The project’s Theory of Change requires reasonable time for the planned four integrated components designed to result in the achievement of the project objective. Each component is designed to catalyse and result in the transformations required to assist southern Iraq to move towards production modalities of Conservation Agriculture, Agroecology and Marshland conservation practices that support Sustainable Land</p>

	<p>Management. Conservation Agriculture is a concept in support of sustainable land management, environmental protection and climate change adaptation and mitigation.</p> <p>FAO in Iraq is promoting the adoption of Conservation Agriculture principles (minimum mechanical soil disturbance (no/zero-tillage, permanent soil cover and crop rotations) that are universally applicable in all agricultural landscapes and cropping systems. However, the project lost time, through delays and the remaining project timeline is too limiting for the purpose of achieving the intended project objective. For instance, it requires demonstrating crop rotations and crop residue/ soil organic matter built up for over 4 to 6 cropping seasons for farmers to start realizing the benefits (economic, agronomic and environmental) of adopting the new technologies of Conservation Agriculture and Agroecology practices for improved Sustainable Land Management. To be widely adopted, all new technology needs to have benefits and advantages that attract a broad group of farmers who understand the differences between the Conventional Agriculture and what they need to adopt for Sustainable Agriculture. Under the existing situation, where the remaining project duration will only allow for one cropping season with neither crop rotation nor crop residue built up, thus the productive landscape of southern Iraq under the project will not measurably contribute to the achievement of global environmental and economic benefits.</p> <p>Conservation agriculture is based on restoring naturally occurring processes and therefore needs a reasonable conversion period before the Conservation Agriculture and Agroecology systems are established and the natural balances are restored. After losing 2 years of the project duration due to the COVID-19 pandemic related restrictions and political instability in the project locations, the project which is planned to end in January 2024 will not be able to achieve most of its important impactful targets. The project objective is to reverse land degradation processes, conserve biodiversity and sustainably manage land and water resources in degraded marshland ecosystems in southern Iraq for greater access to services from resilient ecosystems and improved livelihoods. To achieve such an ecosystem-based project objective, a budgetary review and No Cost Project Extension of 24 months is recommended.</p> <p>As extension officers and pioneer targeted farmers will be the change agents across the project locations, they will assume a facilitating role that will encourage the confidence of farmers new to Conservation Agriculture and Agroecology that the technologies are working for improved sustainable land management. This includes demonstrating the technologies in other farmers' fields, demonstrating the environmental and economic benefits with facts and numbers and training people in the region to help others. Impactful change cannot appear over a short period and will take time for the following reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Farmers need to feel at ease with the new technologies. - Do not have the capital to invest. - Cannot run a big risk, especially when the technologies are new.
--	--

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Need a learning-by-doing environment, which takes reasonable long time. <p>The MTR has assessed that the project is very relevant to all stakeholders and in line with GEF, FAO and country priorities. Interviewees confirmed the importance of implementing the project activities and achieving the main project results. Considering all the above, the MTR team considers that the project results, and the outputs and outcomes, can be achieved if the project is granted an extension.</p>
Responsibility	FAO-GEF Coordination Unit
Proposed timeframe	As soon as possible
Recommendation 2 (Effectiveness)	Develop a Detailed Implementation Plan and implement a Risk Management Plan
Rationale for recommendation	Create a detailed annual project implementation plan that outlines specific and detailed activities, timelines, responsibilities, and resource allocation. This annual plan should be properly endorsed and communicated to national stakeholders. The Risk Management Plan should identify potential risks and their mitigation strategies. This helps to anticipate and address challenges before they escalate.
Responsibility	FAO-Iraq, PMU, Project Task Force, and the Government of Iraq
Proposed timeframe	As soon as possible
Recommendation 3 (Factors affecting performance- Co-financing)	The Project Team should officially Identify the mechanisms for the implementation of the Iraqi Government's in-kind Contributions to the Project
Rationale for recommendation	<p>An official agreement should be prepared and endorsed by the government that clearly shows the type of in-kind contributions expected from the Iraqi government to the project accompanied by a clear timeline for its implementation. The progress in making these contributions should be a standing item on the Steering Committee meeting agenda.</p> <p>Despite the efforts put by FAO Iraq and the Project Team to bring together different stakeholders through conducting regular meetings with Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Agriculture, and Ministry of Water Resources to discuss the challenges and the key issues facing the project implementation and its progress, yet there is still a large gap and room for improvement in the commitment of the Government of Iraq's to co-finance project implementation activities. One of the main agreements during the National Project Steering Committee meetings was the promotion and commitment of co-finance obligations from the Government of Iraq through the Ministry of Environment and other ministries.</p> <p>The Project Team and FAO Iraq should make strong emphasis on this important issue with the Government of Iraq through the Ministry of Environment as the executing partner.</p>

Responsibility	FAO Iraq and the Project Team
Proposed timeframe	As soon as possible
Recommendation 4 (Factors affecting performance- Partnerships and stakeholder engagement)	FAO to ensure that the coordination and oversight mechanisms will be strengthened as soon as possible, including regular meetings of the Project Steering Committee, and the Local Project Implementation Units and enhance the collaboration with Local government Partners through the established mechanisms to speed up project implementation
Rationale for recommendation	<p>Despite the project start date being 01 January 2020, the first National Project Steering Committee was set up and the first Steering Committee meeting was held on 24th of August 2021.</p> <p>The delayed set up of the National Project Steering Committee and the onset of the Steering Committee meeting, this alone is a major indicator explaining why the project activity implementation is behind the scheduled timeline.</p> <p>Although the executing partners expressed commitment to the project, both to the MTR team as well as in recent meetings with FAO staff, this commitment was not corroborated by the modest level of progress in implementation. It is therefore essential that FAO ensures that effective relationships and coalitions are built and the project executing, and oversight structures are made operational (such as the Project Steering Committee and Local Project Implementation Unit).</p> <p>Introduce proper activities for effective and timely collaboration with the project stakeholders through the established national mechanisms to keep all stakeholders informed about the project's progress, challenges, and solutions. This effective and timely collaboration would include preparing TORs for the Steering Committee, national PMU, and LPIUs that identify their role in the project implementation. Additionally, a clear procedure that outlines the number of meetings that should be held in the year, the quorum for the committee meetings, and the decision-making process with the committee/units could be established to ensure effective coordination. Having a written document that outlines the committee/units' responsibilities and expected role would help build trust, enhance national ownership, and fosters a supportive environment for addressing implementation challenges collaboratively to ensure smoother implementation.</p>
Responsibility	Project Team and FAO Iraq
Proposed timeframe	As soon as possible
Recommendation 5 (Factors affecting performance- Monitoring and Evaluation)	Monitor and Evaluate Progress for adaptive management
Rationale for recommendation	Effectively implement the monitoring and evaluation activities for the timely tracking of project progress and the identification of bottlenecks.

	Ensure the timely dissemination of the results to the relevant decision-makers that can make timely adjustments to improve project implementation.
Responsibility	FAO-Iraq and the PMU
Proposed timeframe	As soon as possible

6. Lessons learned

132. As few project activities have been executed and there is little progress towards achieving project results, the MTR did not produce many lessons learned as it is too early in the project's implementation. The project may be expected to have such lessons towards the end of the project. Nevertheless, the MTR generated the following two lessons learned:

- I. It is crucial to maintain regular communication and update the executing partners and stakeholders, even when project activities cannot be implemented yet. Some stakeholders interviewed were not fully aware of the project's progress, so keeping them engaged and informed is important. This will facilitate their involvement and commitment once the project activities commence, as well as ensure their continued engagement when the coordination and supervision structures are not fully operational.
- II. Given the limited coordination and communication between central and local authorities, it becomes vital to take on a mediator role and bring all stakeholders together. FAO-Iraq has played a significant role in this aspect, not only restoring momentum but also fostering commitment from the executing government partners towards project implementation. This mediation and collaboration have been instrumental in overcoming the challenges posed by the coordination gaps to restore implementation momentum by the end of 2022.

7. Appendices

Appendix 1. Terms of reference for the MTR

Appendix 2. Stakeholders interviewed during the MTR

	Name	Position
FAO & Project Team		
1	Dr. Salah ElHaj Hassan	FAO-Rep
2	Veronica Quattrola	Deputy FAO-Rep
3	Alisher Nazirov	FAO M&E Officer
4	Clayton Mashapa	International Project Specialist
5	Ali Al-Hassani	National Project Coordinator
6	Mukhalad Hussein	National Project Specialist
7	Michelle Palacios	Former International Project Specialist
8	Abdel Hameed Hamed	Former Lead Technical Officer
Project's Steering Committee		
9	Rawyia Muzeel	D.G. Forestry and Desertification combating \ MoA
10	Laith Abdul Sattar	Deputy D.G. National Water Resources Management Centre \ MoWR
11	Sarab Ajeel	Head of International Environmental Relationship Dept.
12	Dr. Qasim Tibin Bazzon	Project Manager from MoE
13	Yousif Muayad	(Foremer) Head of International Environmental Relationship Dept.
Project Management Unit PMU		
14	Dr. Qasim Tibin	Project Manager
15	Rana Suahil	Project Manger
16	Fatin Nafal	Executive Secretary
17	Aness Hatem	Member, Foremer Project Manger
Local Project Implementation Unit LPIU – Thi Qar		
18	Rafi Faiq	Deputy Governor
19	Karim Hani	Head of Environment Department
20	Dr. Faqid Abdul Ameer	Head of Agriculture Department
21	Dr. Hadi Salih	Former head of Agriculture Department
22	Riyadh Abdul Ridha	Head of Water Resources Department
Local Project Implementation Unit LPIU – Muthana		
23	Abdulwahab Al-Yasiry	Governor Advisor
24	Yousif Swadi	Head of Environment Department
25	Amir Al-Jabiry	Head of Agriculture Department
26	Ali Baqer Abdel Hameed	Department of Agriculture
27	Dr. Ali Abdul Sadah	Department of Agriculture
28	Eng. Layla	Department of Agriculture
29	Eng. Badriha Shalaha	Department of Agriculture