STAP SCREENING TEMPLATE, OCTOBER 2022

GEF ID	11609
Project title	Strengthening transboundary conserved area management of the Sangha Tri-National (TNS)
Date of screen	May 23, 2025
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1. Summary of STAP's views of the project

STAP is pleased to see a project focusing on support from the GBFF in the Sangha Tri-National landscape, a very important area for biodiversity and climate change mitigation. The project follows a clear and well-structured design, which is based on a strong rationale and thorough baseline analysis of the current situation in the Sangha Tri-National (TNS) landscape. The proposal effectively describes current challenges, future scenarios, and articulates most barriers to conservation. It also defines the challenges associated with TNS's (FTNS's) institutional strengthening.

The Theory of Change is logically sound. However, the proposed impact of the $5 million investment in the FTNS is not compelling. Furthermore, corruption is entrenched in Congo Basin countries and is a concern in TNC. It affects the effectiveness of forest conservation and Indigenous resource rights and livelihoods. STAP encourages WWF-US to consider adding corruption as a project barrier in the Theory of Change.

STAP also notes that the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples is addressed through the FPIC, local governance participation, and livelihood support. Nonetheless, Indigenous-led or project co-design is limited.

The risk analysis is generally comprehensive and includes appropriate mitigation measures. Careful attention should be paid to challenges or risks that may undermine the project logic, such as the effects of climate change and conflict on the TNS landscape.

Overall, the project is promising but would benefit from a more strategic approach to strengthening the FTNS. This includes generating sufficient funds to cover recurring costs for conservation management in the landscape, and a more systemic approach to transformative change in integrating Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IP&LCs)Cs into governance project design and implementation.

Below, STAP details its comments.

STAP's assessment*

□ Concur - STAP acknowledges that the concept has scientific and technical merit

Minor - STAP has identified some scientific and technical points to be addressed in project design

□ Major - STAP has identified significant concerns to be addressed in project design

Please contact the STAP Secretariat if you would like to discuss.

2. Project rationale, and project description – are they sound?

See annex on STAP's screening guidelines.

The **project summary** is appropriate and provides an adequate description of the project's target area and overarching goal, and it articulates most of the barriers the project aims to tackle. The **project objective** is clearly described, but raises some questions regarding how the project will provide a meaningful level of investment in the FTNS to support improved management and governance for the TNS landscape.

The **project rationale** section focuses on a number of sub-sections that provide a good description of the Sangha Tri-National (TNS) landscape, its biodiversity significance and its physical characteristics, the climate and environmental conditions in the region, and the socio-economic context. The problem statement provides a very good description of the current causes and future drivers, which in turn feeds into four narratives that delineate future scenarios that are influenced by different combinations of economic growth and government commitment to sustainable development. The narratives were all plausible and informed the project design. The **project approach** includes a good description of most of the key barriers.

The **project baseline** is generally thorough, supported by summaries of data and statistics. STAP appreciates the inclusion of a section on **lessons learned** from previous projects in the TNS landscape.

In general, the **Theory of Change (ToC)** is well-structured and is based on sound logical reasoning, however, there are two main challenges identified in the TOC: (1) corruption is a barrier to project success, but is not acknowledged; and (2) the key project intervention is investment in the FTNS, however the amount of funding to be provided by the GBFF is unlikely to move the needle in terms of support for ongoing conservation efforts. The intervention may be insufficient, therefore, to achieve the project objective. Corruption is endemic to many Congo Basin countries and is known to significantly impair forest conservation efforts and diminish IP&LC livelihoods, including in the TNS landscape. There is an assumption that additional projects and/or initiatives will be launched at some point in the near future to complement the current GBFF support, but this needs to be explicit.

The **risk analysis** is comprehensive and accurately reflects the project's exposure across nine categories of risk. Each risk is paired with adequate preventive and mitigation measures. Attention to climate risks, environmental risks, and social risks (e.g., conflict) should form part of the theory of change so that the project is designed to account for these challenges.

3. Specific points to be addressed, and suggestions

STAP recommends applying these points when implementing the project:

1. The implementing agency should consider revising the set of barriers to include corruption and revising the TOC to address activities designed to overcome this barrier. For example, there are several papers in the peer-reviewed literature about the impacts of corruption on the conservation of forest biodiversity and IP&LC livelihoods in the STN landscape[1][2][3]. As a further example, in Cameroon, the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife is ranked among the 10 most corrupt out of 150 government agencies. Cameroon, in turn, rates better on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index than nearly every other country in the Congo Basin region. The region as a whole has a median ranking of

[1] Sandker, M., B. M. Campbell, Z. Nzooh, T. Sunderland, V. Amougou, L. Defo and J. Sayer. 2009. Exploring the effectiveness of integrated conservation and development interventions in a Central African forest landscape. Biodivers. Conserv. DOI 10.1007/s10531-009-9613-7

[2] Endamama et al. 2010. A Framework for Assessing Conservation and Development in a Congo Basin Forest Landscape. Tropical Conservation Science 3(3): 262-281. DOI:10.1177/194008291000300303

[3] Sayer, J., Endamana, D., Boedhihartono, A. K., Ruiz-Perez, M., & Breuer, T. 2016. Learning from change in the Sangha Tri-National landscape. International Forestry Review, 18(1), 130-139.

157 out of 180 countries. The region's corruption crisis, therefore, is at the heart of the illegal exploitation of the Congo Basin's forests.

2. The TOC and component 1 should be revised to provide a credible plan for how the FTNS endowment will be sufficiently increased to provide a meaningful level of finance to support recurring operational costs within the protected areas and overall STN landscape. Currently, the FTN endowment is EUR 66.4 million, which, assuming a 4% annual return, can support EUR 1.8M in recurring costs, about 30% of current operating costs. An endowment of EUR 135M is needed to generate the necessary EUR 5.4M to cover recurring costs. Again, assuming 4% annual rate of return on the endowment, the USD 5 million from the GBFF would increase the endowment by only ~ EUR 4.4M, providing only an additional EUR 176,000 per year for recurring costs. Potential mechanisms that might be considered include debt restructuring to support the creation of a Nature Bond[4], blended finance, or Project Finance for Permanence (PFP).[5] These additional financial mechanisms, as well as other partnerships that are necessary for achieving the project objective, should be added to the theory of change. This will help ensure the project logic is necessary and sufficient. Refer to STAP's theory of change primer for advice on developing interventions that are necessary and sufficient.

3. STAP recommends paying greater attention to challenges that will undermine the project logic, such as conflict and climate change. In this manner, the project will be designed to address these challenges through a robust logic. After developing the theory of change, and completing the project design, risks that remain can form part of the risk table. At the moment, this does not appear to have been the case. Innovation risks, should also be revisited for the same reason. STAP's advisory note on Clarifying risks in GEF projects, with a focus on innovation risks, provides guidance and examples on how to complete the risk table.

4. A minor point. It would be valuable to clarify why IUCN will serve as the project's Financial Administrator when they are not involved in any obvious way in project execution.

[4] https://www.nature.org/en-us/what-we-do/our-priorities/protect-water-and-land/land-and-water-stories/nature-bonds/

[5] https://www.worldwildlife.org/publications/securing-sustainable-financing-for-conservation-areas

ANNEX: STAP'S SCREENING GUIDELINES

1. How well does the proposal explain the problem and issues to be addressed in the context of the **system** within which the problem sits and its drivers (e.g. population growth, economic development, climate change, sociocultural and political factors, and technological changes), including how the various components of the system interact?

2. Does the project indicate how **uncertain futures** could unfold (e.g. using simple **narratives)**, based on an understanding of the trends and interactions between the key elements of the system and its drivers?

3. Does the project describe the **baseline** problem and how it may evolve in the future in the absence of the project; and then identify the outcomes that the project seeks to achieve, how these outcomes will change the baseline, and what the key **barriers** and **enablers** are to achieving those outcomes?

4. Are the project's **objectives** well formulated and justified in relation to this system context? Is there a convincing explanation as to **why this particular project** has been selected in preference to other options, in the light of how the future may unfold?

5. How well does the **theory of change** provide an "explicit account of how and why the proposed interventions would achieve their intended outcomes and goal, based on outlining a set of key causal pathways arising from the activities and outputs of the interventions and the assumptions underlying these causal connections".

    - Does the project logic show how the project would ensure that expected outcomes are **enduring** and resilient to possible future changes identified in question 2 above, and to the effects of any conflicting policies (see question 9 below).
    - Is the theory of change grounded on a solid scientific foundation, and is it aligned with current scientific knowledge?
    - Does it explicitly consider how any necessary **institutional and behavioral** changes are to be achieved?
    - Does the theory of change diagram convincingly show the overall project logic, including causal pathways and outcomes?

6. Are the project **components** (interventions and activities) identified in the theory of change each described in sufficient detail to discern the main thrust and basis (including scientific) of the proposed solutions, how they address the problem, their justification as a robust solution, and the critical assumptions and risks to achieving them?

7. How likely is the project to generate global environmental benefits which would not have accrued without the GEF project (**additionality**)?

8. Does the project convincingly identify the relevant **stakeholders**, and their anticipated roles and responsibilities? is there an adequate explanation of how stakeholders will contribute to the

development and implementation of the project, and how they will benefit from the project to ensure enduring global environmental benefits, e.g. through co-benefits?

9. Does the description adequately explain:

   - how the project will build on prior investments and complement current investments, both GEF and non-GEF,
   - how the project incorporates **lessons learned** from previous projects in the country and region, and more widely from projects addressing similar issues elsewhere; and
   - how country policies that are contradictory to the intended outcomes of the project (identified in section C) will be addressed (**policy coherence**)?

10. How adequate is the project's approach to generating, managing and exchanging **knowledge**, and how will lessons learned be captured for adaptive management and for the benefit of future projects?

11. **Innovation and transformation:**
    - If the project is intended to be **innovative:** to what degree is it innovative, how will this ambition be achieved, how will barriers and enablers be addressed, and how might scaling be achieved?
    - If the project is intended to be **transformative:** how well do the project's objectives contribute to transformative change, and are they sufficient to contribute to enduring, transformational change at a sufficient scale to deliver a step improvement in one or more GEBs? Is the proposed logic to achieve the goal credible, addressing necessary changes in institutions, social or cultural norms? Are barriers and enablers to scaling be addressed? And how will enduring scaling be achieved?

12. Have **risks** to the project design and implementation been identified appropriately in the risk table in section B, and have suitable mitigation measures been incorporated? (NB: risks to the durability of project outcomes from future changes in drivers should have been reflected in the theory of change and in project design, not in this table.)