

STAP SCREEN

GEF ID	11304
Project title	Enhancing transboundary fisheries management in the Lower Mekong Basin
Date of screen	4 January 2024
STAP Panel Member	Susanne Schmeier
STAP Secretariat	Virginia Gorsevski

1. Summary of STAP's views of the project

STAP acknowledges the proposed project entitled “Enhancing transboundary fisheries management in the Lower Mekong Basin” which addresses a very important environmental challenge and has the potential to generate significant global environmental benefits if fish biodiversity is maintained/improved in the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB). It also has a great potential for innovation and transformation if fish protection and fisheries management can be reconciled with other sectoral interests. There is also potential for this project to generate important co-benefits with regards to food security, livelihoods and development opportunities for local populations and the empowerment of women.

STAP recommends revisiting the project's the theory of change (ToC) to clarify and strengthen the problem description (problems, root causes, barriers) and the project objectives. Importantly, the project should clarify which problems will actually be addressed by the project and which will not, as many of the issues raised are not reflected in the actual project components and related outputs and outcomes. See STAP's [Theory of Change Primer](#) for more information on developing a strong ToC.

Note to STAP screeners: a summary of STAP's view of the project (not of the project itself), covering both strengths and weaknesses.

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 document describes the problem to be addressed (declining fish stocks) and the challenges that come with it (biodiversity loss, food insecurity). However, the drivers of the problem are mentioned in general but not well described and not well linked to each other (see specific points section below). As a result, it is not entirely clear which drivers will actually be addressed by the project, and which lie outside of the project's scope of influence and could be or are being addressed by a different project or organization. The concept of 'necessary and sufficient' found in STAP' [Primer on Theory of Change](#) is very relevant in this respect and should be consulted to better articulate how this proposed project will contribute to the larger issues facing the region.

The project's objective is similarly unclear and should be sharpened. From the project rationale and description, it appears as though the focus is on the maintenance of fish populations through various measures to address the drivers of fish population decline. However, the stated objective also includes maintaining river integrity (in very general terms – and likely not realistically to be achieved). Moreover, the project intends to address the

impacts of hydropower (and also mentions impacts of upstream developments in China, over which the project has no influence), unsustainable fisheries management, land use change, extraction of sand, etc. (as root causes) but then does to reflect all of these issues in the objectives. Ultimately, the project focuses on improving fisheries governance and scaling it up, which would not clearly not address other drivers (e.g., hydropower operation, sand mining, etc.)

Related, the causal pathways are unclear in terms of how the activities envisioned under each component and related outputs and outcomes actually address the problem at stake (and acknowledge those which are outside of the scope of this project). For example, what role will a nexus assessment play and how will it address not only knowledge gaps under Component 1, but actually contribute to – ideally – policy changes to link to Component 3? Only by making these connections will the project be able to fully address the challenges facing fish populations in the Mekong. Moreover, any transformative power of the project would depend on more fundamental changes in water and related resources management (such as a reconsideration of benefits, not only focusing on economic growth based on hydropower development, but also on other sectors and their contributions to more holistic and sustainable development).

In some cases, it is not clear that scientific and other practical evidence is being used to clearly articulate barriers and justify project design. For example, the PIF states that all three countries are committed to sustainably manage fisheries – but there is no evidence provided to support this statement. Also, there is no consideration of other country priorities the countries that could possibly conflict with sustainable fisheries management (e.g., sand mining, hydropower development, etc.), and which would significantly affect the outcomes of the project. Along these lines, the project identifies weak institutional capacity and a lack of harmonization as barriers, but does not describe *why* these are barriers. For example, what is the evidence for weak institutional capacity, particularly with regards to the Mekong River Commission (MRC) which is considered a relatively strong basin organization compared with other similar organizations.? And why and how would addressing this lead to improvements? Specifically, why is legal harmonization in fisheries needed as opposed to coordination, given the very high level of effort necessary for the harmonization of national laws and the limited international evidence there is for harmonization being a necessity for integrated water resources management?

Finally, STAP also recommends further explanation of a) the role of stakeholders, particularly local communities; and b) how scaling will occur in practice. For the latter, STAP recommends including a separate causal pathway in the ToC. In addition, STAP recommends that project proponents consult the GEF IEO's [Evaluation of the Mekong Basin](#) for lessons learned that could usefully be applied to this project.

Note: provide a general appraisal, asking whether relevant screening guideline questions have been addressed adequately – not all the questions will be relevant to all proposals; no need to comment on every question, only those needing more attention, noting any done very well, but ensure that all are considered. Comments should be helpful, evaluative, and qualitative, rather than yes/no.

3. Specific points to be addressed, and suggestions

Based on these observations, STAP has the following specific suggestions to improve project design:

1. Revisit the problem description which includes incomplete sentences and factual mistakes (e.g. counting Myanmar to the LMB, etc.), to give it a clearer focus on those problems the project actually intends (and is able) to address, and a justification for why those, and not others have been selected, as well as acknowledgment of the ones fall outside of the project's scope (such as climate change, which is described in detail, but not addressed by the project).
2. Use the scientific information detailed in the project (and from additional outside sources) to further explain the barriers and to justify the project design.

3. Revisit the ToC to a) clarify which problems this project intends to address vs. those which are outside of its scope (as mentioned above); b) clearly explain the logic connecting the outcomes and outputs as well as the linkages *between* the components (e.g., Component 2 on more sustainable management of fisheries through promotion of transboundary measures contributes to harmonized policies and plans, but not the other way around – and how; or the lack of linkages between Component 4 and any of the others). Also provide a clearer explanation of how each outcome contributes to a specific causal pathway and thus ultimately the project objective.
4. Clarify the role of stakeholders and add a separate causal pathway explaining how this project will be effectively scaled.

Note: number key points clearly and provide useful information or suggestions, including key literature where relevant. Completed screens should be no more than two or three pages in length.

*categories under review, subject to future revision

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.)