

STAP SCREENING TEMPLATE

GEF ID	11348
Project title	Restoring Ecosystem Connectivity for Biodiversity and Sustainable Livelihoods in the Litani Watershed Project (ECONNECT)
Date of screen	January 18, 2024
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1. Summary of STAP's views of the project

STAP welcomes Lebanon's project on restoring ecosystem connectivity for biodiversity and sustainable livelihoods in the Upper Litani watershed. The project aims to address a series of challenges and barriers that contribute to land degradation and loss of biodiversity, which are thoroughly explained in the project rationale.

STAP highly encourages the project team to improve the project logic by considering the current climatic conditions as drivers and pressure of change in the state of the watershed. The proponent is encouraged to analyze the interactions between key drivers of change, such as climate change, population changes (immigration of refugees), geopolitical conflicts, and fluctuations in the economy, also are highly encouraged when designing and implementing the project. Adaptive management, through close monitoring and learning, will be necessary to maintain the resilience of the socioecological systems that will be targeted. (STAP is aware the specific target areas are still to be decided.)

Below, STAP rates its assessment and provides details of its screening to help improve the project design.

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 rationale articulates comprehensively the problems and context, which includes biodiversity loss, land degradation, pollution from agro-chemicals, and drought. In a similar fashion, the key system drivers influencing GEBs (climate change, a fluctuating economy, and regional conflict), are described. The project also describes a baseline, which this initiative will build upon to improve agricultural and aquaculture production and reduce pollution in the Upper Litanin watershed.

The project proposes three components – (i) strengthening the enabling environment, (ii) promotion of value chains, and (iii) knowledge management – to achieve GEBs via land restoration and biodiversity conservation, along with improving a host of ecosystem services (e.g. improved water quality) that will benefit small-holders and communities. The project will rely on several practices to restore land and reduce biodiversity loss: reduce climate risks through crop diversification, adopt soil and water conservation, and implement agroforestry. Agricultural and aquaculture value chains are proposed to connect smallholders to markets, improve income opportunities, and incentivize investments in land restoration initiatives.

While the logic of the proposal is technically sound, the project can benefit from an explicitly defined framework that organizes the logic underpinning the proposed activities (e.g. the project component 1 would benefit from applying the input and preparatory activities described in the Land Degradation Neutrality conceptual framework). Currently, several practices (mentioned above) are proposed to achieve landscape restoration. Embedding explicitly an integrated framework (e.g. the Land Degradation Neutrality conceptual framework) or approach(es) that include Integrated Land Use Planning in the theory of change will help organize these practices, including how to handle trade-offs between land uses that may arise.

Significant drivers, such as climate change, also need to be reflected throughout the project to ensure the proposed interventions are resilient to drivers of change. Additionally, the project aims to be transformative in addressing degradation and biodiversity loss. To successfully address a transformative ambition, it will be necessary to articulate a more robust knowledge and learning plan that supports scaling and innovation.

Below, STAP proposes recommendations to strengthen the logic.

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

To improve the project's technical soundness, STAP recommends addressing these recommendations:

- STAP welcomes the climate risk description provided in the project rationale. Lebanon is highly vulnerable to climate impacts which will affect agricultural and aquacultural production, its economy, and the well-being of communities. STAP recommends drawing from Lebanon's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) from 2020 to complement the climate change information provided in the PIF. STAP also proposes using climate projections to 2050 instead of 2100. The project team is also highly encouraged to apply a climate risk screening before its design is completed. The World Bank Climate Change Knowledge Portal provides Lebanon's NDC, climate projections, and a climate risk screening tool:
<https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/lebanon/climate-data-projections>
<https://climatescreeningtools.worldbank.org/>
- To strengthen the project logic, STAP recommends identifying the critical assumptions for each outcome, and testing them during project implementation with the aim to capture learning and pursue adaptive management as necessary. For example, the project assumes that value chains will unequivocally contribute to restoration. STAP suggests developing a separate theory of change (or comprehensive pathways for each value chain) for each proposed value chain and testing explicitly the assumptions related to each outcome. With the appropriate monitoring and learning, this process will generate evidence about how value chains are contributing to GEBs and improving livelihoods. This learning can also identify opportunities, or barriers, for innovation that are most likely linked to this project's transformative ambition. Risks to the value chains also should be clearly defined in the project's theory of change, and in the separate logic chains – e.g., shifting market dynamics, drought, geopolitical risk. Adaptive management will likely be required.
- Although the PIF states that an integrated approach, or approaches, will be used to implement restoration activities, it would be useful to define explicitly the approach(es) in the theory of change. This will enhance understanding on how the selected approach is expected to lead to restoration. For example, the PIF mentions several approaches (e.g., spatial planning, land use planning, landscape management, soil and water conservation, agroforestry). How the approach will lead to restoration, or assist in defining restoration activities, needs to be detailed in the PPG to be developed.

- Additionally, there appears to be a discrepancy on the use of spatial planning. In the project rationale, the PIF describes that it is difficult to implement "...comprehensive and unified soil management plans in a given geographical area because 75% of farmers operate on less than 1 hectare of agricultural land." Nonetheless, in the project description, spatial zoning is highlighted as a strategy for crop diversification to achieve ecological restoration within the landscape. It is unclear how spatial planning at the landscape level can occur when extensive soil management plans may not be feasible. Suggest explaining better the connections between catchment-scale land use planning, integrated landscape management, and the use of large-scale plans for small farms.
- STAP is pleased the project seeks to achieve biodiversity conservation, reduce or reverse land degradation, and improve ecosystem services. When implementing an integrated (landscape) approach, the project is encouraged to assess and manage the trade-offs between land uses that are likely to occur. Climate change may also influence trade-offs, for example, by increasing degradation in an agricultural parcel destined for crop production where reducing or reversing degradation is no longer possible. Therefore, STAP strongly recommends designing project interventions based on a climate risk screening analysis, as recommended earlier.
- Climate risks and other key drivers of change, such as potential conflict and increase in population (i.e., the influx of refugees) need to be articulated explicitly throughout the project logic. In this regard, STAP recommends articulating simple future narratives during the design of the project to ensure the interventions are designed to endure unwanted change. STAP's advice on simple future narratives can be found here: <https://www.stagef.org/index.php/resources/advisory-documents/simple-future-narratives-brief-and-primer>
- Revisit component 3 so its general thrust is on learning and managing knowledge. As currently written, this component is more about delivering products that exemplify and distribute lessons learned and best practices. The entire theory of change can also be used as a monitoring and learning tool if risks and assumptions are appropriately identified in each of the pathways. Refer to STAP's theory of change primer: <https://stagef.org/resources/advisory-documents/theory-change-primer> For this component and for component 2, STAP suggests the team considers the learnings of the recent GEF/FAO DS-SLM publication 'Promoting sustainable land management through evidence-based decision support - A guide with country insights'. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc6118en>
- The aims and objectives of the project align with the concept of land degradation neutrality. As such, the project team may consider using the logic model for effective implementation of LDN (see Orr et al., 2017, pg 66). This model includes activities that set the stage (socio-ecological and economic state of the area), assesses land potential, land condition, and resilience (socio-ecological). This exercise can inform the preparation of Ecosystem restoration plans (component 2) and for output 1.1. (priority areas of high ecological value are restored). It can also help addressing root causes of Barrier 3 (e.g. lack of coherence, integrated restoration planning...). Suggested resources for the project team include: Cowie, A. L., Orr, B. J., Sanchez, V. M. C., Chasek, P., Crossman, N. D., Erlewein, A., ... & Welton, S. (2018). Land in balance: The scientific conceptual framework for Land Degradation Neutrality. Environmental Science & Policy, 79, 25-35; The contribution of integrated land use planning and integrated landscape management to implementing Land Degradation Neutrality: Entry points and support tools <https://www.unccd.int/resources/reports/contribution-integrated-land-use-planning-and-integrated-landscape-management>
- STAP notes the project could benefit from exploring the extensive WOCAT database. This database contains an extensive list of documented good practices for sustainable land management arising from GEF projects. Please refer to: https://qcat.wocat.net/en/wocat/list/?type=wocat&filter__qg_funding_project__funding_project=1).

- STAP recommends the project developers think about indicators that could enable monitoring if the co-benefits the PIF describes are achieved at the end of the project lifespan. STAP's advice on co-benefits could assist in this regard, which can be accessed here: <https://stapgef.org/index.php/resources/advisory-documents/incorporating-co-benefits-design-gef-projects>

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.

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.)