STAP guidelines for screening GEF projects

Part I: Project Information	Response	
GEF ID	10708	
Project Title	Towards a Land Degradation-Neutral Azerbaijan	
Date of Screening	27 November 2020	
STAP member screener	Graciela Metternicht	
STAP secretariat screener	Guadalupe Duron	
STAP Overall Assessment and Rating	**Minor issues to be considered during project design** STAP welcomes FAO's project "Towards a Land degradation neutral Azerbaijan". The project aims to support this country's efforts to develop and implement LDN national targets. It plans to do so by a combination of activities to strengthen the enabling environment for LDN, selecting Absheron Peninsula as pilot area to demonstrate how to implement LDN interventions through SLM practices that will contribute to rehabilitation of degraded lands and improved and improved livelihood resilience. The project intends to upscale LDN experiences through monitoring and evaluation, knowledge management and sharing of lessons learned to advance the achievement of the LDN commitments of Azerbaijan. The project also aspires to introduce new knowledge on innovative SLM practices that have not been widely demonstrated in Azerbaijan, through a holistic tackling of land and water problems on the Absheron Peninsula, including practices to allow different sectors and stakeholders to improve current unsustainable practices in the region. STAP welcomes the use of the scientific conceptual framework for LDN in the preparation of the PIF, particularly the team's goal of aligning LDN interventions with national land-use planning frameworks, and of integrating information derived from assessments related to enabling the LDN environment into national decision-making processes related to management of natural capital.	

STAP advises that the PPG includes a Theory of Change that incorporates the risks mentioned in this PIF, and plans for actions that address these risks to avoid failure in delivering the vision and planned outcomes. Of note is the team's comment that challenges posed by the pandemic are further aggravated by the shortage of irrigation water due to global climate change, the improper use of water resources and the lack of adequate irrigation infrastructure.

In this regard STAP strongly recommends the team to adopt the suggestions provided in the climate change risk screening document; and that it follows the LDN guidelines for project implementation concerning the completion of preparatory assessments that consider land potential, socio-economic assessments and resilience of the areas where LDN interventions are planned. STAP recommends that climate-resilient SLM interventions be applied, given the projections of climate change mentioned in this PIF and climate change screening document.

STAP welcomes the intention to value ecosystem services to inform land-use planning and behavioral change in support of LDN. With respect to the latter, it is recommended the Theory of Change considers the inclusion of a narrative that defines the problem in terms of behavioral change (including identification of targeted groups or individuals) to facilitate the identification of levers more effective to attain pro-LDN behaviors.

The project plans to assess the current natural capital of the land in the peninsula, and the economic effect of action versus inaction related to SLM. New incentives for farmers and private sector engagement in SLM and in LDN can be explored. Furthermore, STAP recommends looking into prior GEF and non-GEF funded projects that have successfully implemented payment for ecosystem services and similar market-based instruments.

Given that insufficient cooperation between many institutional stakeholders is identified as a high risk, STAP

	strongly recommends the application of multi-stakeholder dialogue processes, and acknowledges the thoughtful planning given to project coordination. Hereafter STAP further advice on aspects the PPG needs to improve and/or address.	
Part I: Project Information **B. Indicative Project Description Summary**	**What STAP looks for**	**Response**
Project Objective	Is the objective clearly defined, and consistently related to the problem diagnosis?	Yes
Project components	A brief description of the planned activities. Do these support the project's objectives?	Yes, pages 30-33 describe main project activities to be organized around three main components. STAP recommends preparatory activities related to component #1 include assessment for land potential, resilience (e.g. use the RAPTA or similar approaches) and socio-economic conditions of the project area, as suggested earlier and in accordance with the STAP LDN guidelines, and the scientific conceptual framework for LDN. STAP acknowledged the mention of 'national indicators of LDN' and advises these include indicator for locally relevant ecosystem services that are not covered by the 3 global LDN indicators. Thought needs to be given in components 1 and 2 on incentives for landholders and for the private sector; consider market based instruments as proposed in Baumber et al 2018 For component #2, do consider the magnitude and salt-types when designing land reclamation and rehabilitation interventions that advance LDN. Seek nature based solutions such as bioremediation using vermitechnology (Ansari, ABDULLAH ADIL. "Reclamation of sodic soils through vermitechnology." Journal of Soil and Nature 1, no. 1 (2007): 27-31.) For component #3: in the preparation of the PPG, this component needs to identify indicators and metrics that enable to assess learning and uptake of

		new 'behaviors' that are pro-LDN. A good Theory of Change and logic framework will be needed that link the planned activities with the objectives, and that establish a series of core indicators related to the outputs associated with activities, in such a way that monitoring and evaluation can be undertaken following the principles of adaptive management the PIF mentiosn. Overall plan activities using integrated spatial land use planning; and make clear the link between the demonstration aspects of the project (component #2), and how the implementation of activities under Component #2 will be extrapolated to Components #1 and #3 (which have a broader, national scale coverage), a
Outcomes	A description of the expected short-term and medium-term effects of an intervention. Do the planned outcomes encompass important global environmental benefits/adaptation benefits?	Short and medium term effects are described and the narratives associated to the alternative scenarios. The planned outcomes do encompass important global environmental benefits. Adaptation can also be claimed by this project if the PPG attends suggestions given in the climate change screening document.
	Are the global environmental benefits/adaptation benefits likely to be generated?	Achievement of the global environmental benefits enunciated is plausible, and it will require adaptive management (as mentioned in the PIF), good multi-stake dialogue processes (see STAP guidelines), and the ability to co-operate with the different projects described in the baseline that will provide inputs to this project. STAP recommends revising the claimed global environmental benefits during the PPG preparation, preferable after an assessment of land degradation, land potential and resilience of pilot areas is completed.
Outputs	A description of the products and services which are expected to result from the project. Is the sum of the outputs likely to contribute to the outcomes?	The outputs are likely to contribute o the proposed outcomes, and the team is encouraged to develop a good theory of change, connecting outcomes, outputs and activities to ensure that all risks and

		barriers mentioned are attended in the design of activities conducive to the outputs.
Part II: Project justification	A simple narrative explaining the project's logic, i.e. a theory of change.	The project does not include a theory of change, rather a copy of the logic framework that underpins the scientific conceptual framework of LDN.
1. Project description. Briefly describe: 1) the global environmental and/or adaptation problems, root causes and barriers that need to be addressed (systems description)	Is the problem statement well-defined?	Yes, causes of land degradation in the nation and the selected area (Absheron peninsula) are described; including the pressing issue of scarcity of freshwater and anthropic pollution.
	Are the barriers and threats well described, and substantiated by data and references?	Barriers are well described, and basic references provided.
	For multiple focal area projects: does the problem statement and analysis identify the drivers of environmental degradation which need to be addressed through multiple focal areas; and is the objective well-defined, and can it only be supported by integrating two, or more focal areas objectives or programs?	n/a
2) the baseline scenario or any associated baseline projects	Is the baseline identified clearly?	No, the project provides a description (pg 27) of the baseline in terms of drivers and pressures of the current state of land degradation in the country and the project area; it identifies current responses of the government (ie. legislation) that links to LDN, and describes the baseline of associates projects that will provide some baselines information. The team acknowledges that *limited research has been done to date on the Absheron peninsula of where land degradation is occurring, and with what intensity, including soil salinization processes, which has led to a lack of proper maps in general. Therefore, at the PIF stage, it was not possible to find a suitable map including a detailed analysis of the problem, but it was proposed to conduct the needed mapping during the PPG phase*. (pg 28)

	Does it provide a feasible basis for quantifying the project's benefits?	No, and the team recognizes that limitation, and STAP encourages the team to conduct a good inventory of datasets that can be used to establish a quantitative baseline (data sets are mentioned in the PIF, but they need to be assessed for the 'useability', that is completeness, access, reliability, accuracy); identify sets of indicators and metrics that are needed to establish a baseline for the benefits that need to be quantified, and for establishing targets that will underpin activities and outputs of the project.
	Is the baseline sufficiently robust to support the incremental (additional cost) reasoning for the project?	The PIF lacks information necessary to appraise this aspect of the proposal.
	For multiple focal area projects:	
	are the multiple baseline analyses presented (supported by data and references), and the multiple benefits specified, including the proposed indicators;	
	are the lessons learned from similar or related past GEF and non-GEF interventions described; and	In a limited manner in the baseline. STAP encourages the team to consult the database of GEF projects that have conducted SLM in salt affected areas, and drylands overall. STAP also encourages to consult a recent special issue of the journal of environmental science and policy on LDN , which includes reflections and learnings of good practice to implement LDN. And the recent publication Delivering an enabling environment and multiple benefits for land degradation neutrality: Stakeholder perceptions and progress
	how did these lessons inform the design of this project?	Lessons learned and data collected by the Management of natural resources and safeguarding of ecosystem services for sustainable rural development in the South Caucasus (ECOserve)". will be used to strengthen the proposed project. The GEF funded "Conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity: Strengthening network of protected areas through improved governance and management" to begin in 2021. will be used for coordination purposes (one of ECOServe outputs is related to the restoration of the degraded lands through application of the Integrated Landscape

		Approach. The Adaptation planning support for Azerbaijan" project is mentioned in the baseline section though no mention on how data and lessons from this project will inform the proposed LDN project.
3) the proposed alternative scenario with a brief description of expected outcomes and components of the project	What is the theory of change?	The ToC is guided by the assumption that strengthening of the policy and institutional framework in support of LDN, establishment of LDN monitoring and reporting systems, support to the multi-sectoral land-use planning processes in Azerbaijan, as well as capacity development of institutions and individuals can advance achieving the LDN commitments of Azerbaijan.

The project needs to revise and strengthen the theory of change, to include how it will deal with the behavioral aspects that it aspires to change, including targeted stakeholders, activities and their linkages with outputs and outcomes; the ToC needs also to include external factors (climate change, pandemics, etc) and internal factors (lack of cooperation) that may affect the planned pathways. In short, more work on assumptions about how the proposed changes might happen and about contextual drivers that may affect wither the activities and outputs are appropriate for influencing the desired change in the Absheron peninsula.

STAP encourages the team to use the Theory of Change Primer and the guidelines on multi-stakeholder dialogues plus the forthcoming STAP guidance on behavioral change to help in the design of a theory of change and coherent narrative. |
| | What is the sequence of events (required or expected) that will lead to the desired outcomes? | Components 1, 2 and 3 explain the sequence of events, and STAP recommends the team maps better the 'links' between the components and the desired outcomes during the PPG phase. |

	What is the set of linked activities, outputs, and outcomes to address the project's objectives?	Explained in the document. Please refer to earlier comments to enhance this aspect
	Are the mechanisms of change plausible, and is there a well-informed identification of the underlying assumptions?	The mechanisms of change are plausible, but there needs to be a good Theory of Change in place, complemented by a clear logic framework that maps the mechanisms of change (including those that will prompt behavioral change mentioned in the PIF). STAP recommends a backwards mapping from an intervention goal through all the long and short-term outcomes to the outputs needed to achieve it, identifying a logic arrangement of causal links between these to check the underlying assumptions stand.
	Is there a recognition of what adaptations may be required during project implementation to respond to changing conditions in pursuit of the targeted outcomes?	The risk section describes adaptations that could be required, and STAP recommends these risks be included in the revised ToC.
5) incremental/additional cost reasoning and expected contributions from the baseline, the GEF trust fund, LDCF, SCCF, and co-financing	GEF trust fund: will the proposed incremental activities lead to the delivery of global environmental benefits?	The narrative provided in the PIF indicates the proposed incremental activities can lead to the delivery of GEBs, though STAP recommends GEBs and indictors to measure their attainment are revised in the PPG phase, and strengthened.
	LDCF/SCCF: will the proposed incremental activities lead to adaptation which reduces vulnerability, builds adaptive capacity, and increases resilience to climate change?	n/a
6) global environmental benefits (GEF trust fund) and/or adaptation benefits (LDCF/SCCF)	Are the benefits truly global environmental benefits/adaptation benefits, and are they measurable?	Attainment of LDN delivers GEBs, and STAP recommends the indicators be revised (See earlier comments)
	Is the scale of projected benefits both plausible and compelling in relation to the proposed investment?	yes
	Are the global environmental benefits/adaptation benefits explicitly defined?	Yes, STAP recommends revision of the GEBs in the PPG phase
	Are indicators, or methodologies, provided to demonstrate how the global environmental benefits/adaptation benefits will be measured and monitored during project implementation?	Somewhat; this aspect of the project needs to be improved in the PPG, refer to earlier comments and the use of locally-relevant complementary indicators explained in the STAP LDN guidelines and the LDN conceptual framework
	What activities will be implemented to increase the project's resilience to climate change?	This aspect is not clearly explained; the project baseline of the PIF includes a UNDP project on

		adaptation planning support to increase capacity on climate resilience and adaptation in water, agriculture and coastal areas, through the implementation of actions and activities that will reduce or eliminate barriers to an effective adaptation process at both the national and local levels. The PIF states that climate change assessments related to the agricultural sector and collected data will be used to strengthen the proposed LDN project. STAP strongly encourages that climate change vulnerability (exposure, sensitivity and adaptive capacity) are considered in component #2; that proposed SLM and other LDN-related interventions are 'climate-resilient', and that the PPG considers the suggestions of the CC screening document.
7) innovative, sustainability and potential for scaling-up	Is the project innovative, for example, in its design, method of financing, technology, business model, policy, monitoring and evaluation, or learning?	There is innovation in the proposed mapping of the natural capital, on the coupling of LDN conceptual framework with the Economics of Land Degradation and on the proposed analysis of linkages between land condition, degradation and its impact on livelihoods from a gender lens (i.e. how land degradation affects women and men differently), and on assessing perceptions of stakeholders on the impact of land degradation, their perception of responsibilities and mitigation practices. The project has room to bring in innovation in business models (e.g. PPPs), policy (mix of instruments ranging from market based to behavioral, and education); incentives around PES, 'carbon farming' and 'environmental trusts that collect funds from those that will degrade the landscape and cannot offset using the like for like principle of LDN). See for instance the work in australia of the [Biodiversity Conservation Trust]., which provides a novel way to engage the private sector that has a stake in land degradation and it is willing to support restoration and rehabilitation.

		There is also scope for innovation in interventions to rehabilitate salt affected areas through bioremediation (e.g. vermitechnology) and to use more intensively remote sensing (satellite, airborne, drone based) to map baselines and monitor indicators of interventions.
	Is there a clearly-articulated vision of how the innovation will be scaled-up, for example, over time, across geographies, among institutional actors?	Adoption of land-use planning frameworks at national level that integrate the LDN principles and targets will be the main vehicle for scaling up of LDN andSLM in Azerbaijan. Furthermore Knowledge management and tracking of project impacts will inform adaptive learning to enable adjustments and ensure that neutrality is maintained in the future
	Will incremental adaptation be required, or more fundamental transformational change to achieve long term sustainability?	Provided a clear mechanism of change is worked out in the PPG, that stakeholders are empowered through actions that strengthen human and social capital and that climate change vulnerability is factored in the interventions, incremental changes proposed will achieve long term sustainability.
1b. Project Map and Coordinates. Please provide geo-referenced information and map where the project interventions will take place.		Provided.
2. Stakeholders. Select the stakeholders that have participated in consultations during the project identification phase: Indigenous people and local communities; Civil society organizations; Private sector entities. If none of the above, please explain why. In addition, provide indicative information on how stakeholders, including	Have all the key relevant stakeholders been identified to cover the complexity of the problem, and project implementation barriers?	Relevant stakeholders have been identified and their role in the project. STAP recommends identifying representatives of youth organisations and that training on LDN reaches this group.

civil society and indigenous peoples, will be engaged in the project preparation, and their respective roles and means of engagement.		
	What are the stakeholders' roles, and how will their combined roles contribute to robust project design, to achieving global environmental outcomes, and to lessons learned and knowledge?	STAP recommends stakeholders that are targets of behavior change and those that can be 'agents' of that change are identified in the PPG so that actions and responsibilities can be assigned and those stakeholders included in relevant phases of the project design and implementation.
3. Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment. Please briefly include below any gender dimensions relevant to the project, and any plans to address gender in project design (e.g. gender analysis). Does the project expect to include any gender-responsive measures to address gender gaps or promote gender equality and women empowerment? Yes/no/ tbd. If possible, indicate in which results area(s) the project is expected to contribute to gender equality: access to and control over resources; participation and decision-making; and/or economic benefits or services. Will the project's results framework or logical framework include gender-sensitive indicators? yes/no /tbd	Have gender differentiated risks and opportunities been identified, and were preliminary response measures described that would address these differences?	The proposed project acknowledges that women still play the most important role in sustainable natural resource management, as home-makers, as farmers and land managers. In this context, the project will pay special attention to the involvement of women, especially in decision-making, policy planning activities, capacity building, and investments on the ground. Adequate gender screening of the project will take place in the preparation phase in order to ensure equalbenefits for both men and women. The project will make every effort possible to ensure women participate in all project activities, including in data collectionand analysis, policy development and planning, restoration, and awareness-raising activities. STAP recommends the team uses the manual for gender-responsive land degradation neutrality transformative projects and programmes to devise LDN interventions, including training.

	Do gender considerations hinder full participation of an important stakeholder group (or groups)? If so, how will these obstacles be addressed?	Gender considerations will not hinder other important stakeholders, and STAP recommends to include gender and youth as a group. The 2013 report of the World Bank provides important insights on the challenges of this group; this project provided support for enhancing employment opportunities and social interaction for IDP youth to ease the path to financial independence and a smooth transition to adulthood. STAP suggests the project team reflects on the learnings of projects like this and considers component #2 includes activities that foster jobs and training for youth.
5. Risks. Indicate risks, including climate change, potential social and environmental risks that might prevent the project objectives from being achieved, and, if possible, propose measures that address these risks to be further developed during the project design	Are the identified risks valid and comprehensive? Are the risks specifically for things outside the project's control? Are there social and environmental risks which could affect the project? For climate risk, and climate resilience measures: • How will the project's objectives or outputs be affected by climate risks over the period 2020 to 2050, and have the impact of these risks been addressed adequately? • Has the sensitivity to climate change, and its impacts, been assessed? • Have resilience practices and measures to address projected climate risks and impacts been considered? How will these be dealt with? • What technical and institutional capacity, and information, will be needed to address climate risks and resilience enhancement measures?	Risks identified are comprehensive and STAP recommends the revision of 'climate change risks' to include the questions here on the left as a checklist; as said earlier the PPG needs to consider the suggestions of the climate risk screening document can help to address some of these questions and improve the analysis of risks.
6. Coordination. Outline the coordination with other relevant GEF-financed and other related initiatives	Are the project proponents tapping into relevant knowledge and learning generated by other projects, including GEF projects?	Somewhat; 3 projects are identified that will provide learnings and information to this project. STAP strongly recommends the team 'mines' the GEF database to search for leanings of other GEF projects that have pursued similar objectives in socio-ecological contexts similar to the one of Azerbaijan; there is also a good body of knowledge in literature about good practice on reversing land

		degradation of salt affected areas that the team needs to consider in the PPG.
	Is there adequate recognition of previous projects and the learning derived from them?	See comment above
	Have specific lessons learned from previous projects been cited?	See earlier comments
	How have these lessons informed the project's formulation?	See earlier comments
	Is there an adequate mechanism to feed the lessons learned from earlier projects into this project, and to share lessons learned from it into future projects?	The baseline describes coordination with 3 related projects (gef and non-gef) that will feed into this project, and component #3 mentions mechanisms for sharing lessons from the proposed LDN project.
8. Knowledge management. Outline the "Knowledge Management Approach" for the project, and how it will contribute to the project's overall impact, including plans to learn from relevant projects, initiatives and evaluations.	What overall approach will be taken, and what knowledge management indicators and metrics will be used?	The 3 components describe the processes of data collation and collection succinctly. More thinking and work is needed to propose relevant indicators and metrics for knowledge management and sharing. Consider to adapt some learnings on metrics for KM from this past GEF project: Community-based project assessment using the indicators of resilience in SEPLS: Lessons from the GEF-Satoyama Project, as well as the information provided in the paper entitled Cross-scale monitoring and assessment of land degradation and sustainable land management: A methodological framework for knowledge management
	What plans are proposed for sharing, disseminating and scaling-up results, lessons and experience?	Described in component #3; and in page 52. STAP recommends two way communication channel with the UNCCD Knowledge Hub to use the knowledge available in that platform to inform design of this project and to share the learnings from this project beyond the national context.

Notes

STAP advisory response	Brief explanation of advisory response and action proposed
1. **Concur**	STAP acknowledges that on scientific or technical grounds the concept has merit. The proponent is invited to approach STAP for advice at any time during the development of the project brief prior to submission for CEO endorsement.
	* In cases where the STAP acknowledges the project has merit on scientific and technical grounds, the STAP will recognize this in the screen by stating that ***"STAP is satisfied with the scientific and technical quality of the proposal and encourages the proponent to develop it with same rigor. At any time during the development of the project, the proponent is invited to approach STAP to consult on the design."***
2. **Minor issues to be considered during project design**	STAP has identified specific scientific /technical suggestions or opportunities that should be discussed with the project proponent as early as possible during development of the project brief. The proponent may wish to:
	(i) Open a dialogue with STAP regarding the technical and/or scientific issues raised;
	(ii) Set a review point at an early stage during project development, and possibly agreeing to terms of reference for an independent expert to be appointed to conduct this review.
	The proponent should provide a report of the action agreed and taken, at the time of submission of the full project brief for CEO endorsement.

3. **Major issues to be considered during project design**	STAP proposes significant improvements or has concerns on the grounds of specified major scientific/technical methodological issues, barriers, or omissions in the project concept. If STAP provides this advisory response, a full explanation would also be provided. The proponent is strongly encouraged to:
	(i) Open a dialogue with STAP regarding the technical and/or scientific issues raised; (ii) Set a review point at an early stage during project development including an independent expert as required. The proponent should provide a report of the action agreed and taken, at the time of submission of the full project brief for CEO endorsement.