

STAP SCREENING TEMPLATE

GEF ID	11249
Project title	Ecosystem restoration and sustainable livelihoods in the Biocultural Corridor of the Central West of Mexico (COBIOCOM)
Date of screen	June 15, 2023
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1. Summary of STAP's views of the project

STAP welcomes Mexico's project "Ecosystem restoration and sustainable livelihoods in the Biocultural Corridor of the Central West of Mexico (COBIOCOM)", and is broadly supportive of it. STAP recognizes Mexico's ambition to transform practices and behaviors to improve biological connectivity in COBIOCOM through land restoration.

To achieve the project's transformative potential, STAP recommends strengthening the theory of change to embrace innovation (e.g. green value chains), and scale its desired change. STAP also encourages the project team to strengthen the causal connections between components – for example, between integrated land use planning/policy coherence (component 1) and pursuing green value chains (component 3) to avoid undesired consequences due to leakage from deforestation, or from other types of incoherences in policies and practices; and to identify and distinguish real assumptions in the logic chains from activities that others need to undertake to make the project a success.

Additionally, STAP recommends to design with the intention for the outcomes to be resilient to future changes.

Below, STAP elaborates its recommendations, with suggestions of issues to address before CEO sign-off.

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
- X 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 summary and objective are good. Threading of gender responsiveness throughout also is notable, though this will require further enactment as the project is implemented.

To achieve the project objective of rebuilding ecological integrity in COBIOCOM, the project will rely on four main components (+M&E). The components are suitably mapped to address the barriers of achieving GEB outcomes. The immediate drivers of the problem are well described – that is, poor biological connectivity in COBIOCOM is attributed to deforestation, and degradation, resulting from an increase in agricultural and livestock production, and urbanization. However, these need some further probing – what are the underlying drivers that cause the on-going land degradation, over-exploitation, and illegal use of forest resources, among other issues? For example, we understand illegal charcoal-making is one such pressure, really driven by a mixture of local poverty but also urban demand for charcoal, driven in turn by the culture of urban Mexicans. Presumably issues such as population, inequality, cultural expectations, climate change, and other elements, are

implicated. These drivers may not be easily addressed by a GEF intervention. As a result, the project should consider some simple plausible narratives of how these drivers may unfold as part of the baseline scenario, and test proposed interventions against these futures to ensure the interventions will work (ie. are robust to future changes – see STAP’s Simple Future Narratives Primer for an approach to this). At present population growth and climate change are raised in the Project Rationale, but not really addressed in the design.

The project rationale also briefly describes a transformational approach. While a transformative ambition for the project is welcome by STAP, a more detailed articulation of this vision, supported by a theory of change, will be needed. STAP provides further advice below on how the project could strengthen its logic to support transformation in COBIOCOM. This logic chain includes embracing the innovative potential of the project, particularly in component 3, which will harness blended finance mechanisms to improve agricultural and forestry practices.

STAP acknowledges the project’s theory of change, which is a good start, linking barriers to causal pathways to outcomes, and probably with a great deal of thinking that is hidden in the PIF summary. Two weaknesses of the ToC as currently expressed are:

- (i) A lack of consideration of whether the set of components is both necessary (this is likely) and sufficient (this is less likely) to achieve the project goal. If these 4 components are perfectly successful, with the project goal automatically happen? What else might be needed? Other causal pathways that might be needed may not be in scope for the GEF, but it is important to identify them both to check that it is possible to reach the goal, and because if others are delivering these pathways, then it identifies key partnerships to develop or coordinate with them.
- (ii) A set of assumptions are provided (p.21) that often in fact identify these additional pathways that are necessary to make the whole set sufficient. These should not be treated as assumptions – the project can choose to engage with actors who are delivering these additional actions and increase the chances that they will be carried out at the right time to ensure the project delivers successfully. There will be other issues on the chains of logic of the existing causal pathways which are real assumptions – where the project is reasonably assuming that certain outputs will result in the targeted outcome, but where there is not yet strong evidence for this. In these instances, monitoring should be put in place to ensure that the assumption is justified - e.g. that if finance is made available to farmers, they will be willing to take it up. Monitoring of, and learning about, these assumptions (and if necessary, project adjustments) should be a key part of Component 5 on M&E.

(See STAP’s ToC Primer for more on these two points.) Below, STAP provides additional advice on how to strengthen the theory of change.

Several of the risks identified at p.21-22 and in the Risk Table (e.g., climate change, political instability, conflict, economic risks) are risks to the durability of GEBs and ought to be dealt with in the fundamental design of the response to the problem by the project, rather than in a post hoc risk assessment about implementation. For example, increased fire risk from climate change is a known future, albeit perhaps uncertain in extent; the project should be designed to be robust to this possibility, so it does not need to appear in the Risk Table (using simple future narratives (as above) provides a way of handling this sort of driver). By contrast, ensuring the project delivery can cope with the chance that events such as a major drought happen during delivery is an implementation risk which should be addressed in the Table, just like loss of key staff or political support.

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

As the project is developed, STAP offers the following suggestions to strengthen it:

1. Provide more details on the trends of drivers, and the interactions between drivers, that are likely to affect the resilience of the project, such as climate change, population growth, market demands affecting global supply of commodities (agave, beef, avocado, berries), and the political instability/conflict affecting the project area. This description can strengthen the analysis, which will be necessary to address the complexity of the problem the project aims to solve.
2. Design the project in a manner that will result in resilient outcomes – that is, the outcomes will not be undermined by the drivers listed in #1, or other possible factors. This entails describing simple future narratives based on the priority drivers (possibly those listed in #1), including their interactions. Revisit the theory of change considering the narratives to help ensure the outcomes are resilient to unwanted change. Refer to STAP’s guidance on simple narratives cited below.
3. In describing the components (p.23-24) try not to just repeat what is in the diagram; instead focus on describing the logical links of the causal pathways and (often implicit) assumptions (where one outputs is assumed to result in an outcome, but the evidence for this may not be strong) that underlie these.
4. Pursue a policy analysis for the development of component 1. An analysis will assist with identifying complementarities and conflicts between policies across governance levels (municipal, state, national, and international) and sectors. This analysis also can be helpful in identifying policy beneficiaries – that is, agents of change who need to be involved in framing the problem, as well as in identifying plausible solutions. Furthermore, a policy analysis will benefit the traceability of green value chains on agricultural and forestry products that will be supported by component 3. Refer to STAP’s guidance on policy coherence cited below.
5. Related to this, on p.18-19 supportive policies are outlined, but there is no critical analysis of whether there are also conflicting policies that may undermine the success of COBIOCOM, such as agricultural subsidies, under-valued water resources, development priorities that conflict with environmental outcomes, or with other issues. On p.38 the assertion is made that there are NO contradictory policies; this seems implausible and should at least be justified – has the full range of agricultural and development policies been considered? Do no policies create any incentives for illegal harvesting of forest products or expansion of agriculture? The earlier problem definition seems to imply so.
6. Strengthen the theory of change by specifying how population growth, climate change, market fluctuations, political instability, in-migration/out-migration, will affect the short and long-term outcomes. For example, climate change will have an impact on agricultural productivity (e.g. water shortage), and forests (e.g. incidence of fires increases); therefore, affecting components 1 to 3 in various ways. Mapping these relationships and designing for resilience – i.e., developing a few simple future scenarios to ensure outcomes are resilient to unwanted change – is necessary for GEB and livelihood outcomes.
7. Assess whether the project’s objective is truly transformative. If so, design with this intent by developing the theory of change to reflect a logic that supports transformation. For example, the project objective is focused on enhancing the biological and socio-cultural connectivity of COBICOM through the four components. Ask whether these activities, are necessary and sufficient to achieve transformation? Is the logic in the theory of change robust enough to deliver transformation? STAP has developed a simple logic tree for assessing the transformative potential of a GEF project, which can assist the project team with this exercise. Refer to STAP’s guidance on “Achieving transformation through GEF investments” cited below.
8. Design to learn quickly from the innovative financial mechanisms supported by component 3. Because green value chains introduce different risks to the durability of GEB and livelihood outcomes, STAP recommends unpacking the assumptions associated with achieving environmental, socio-economic, and financial outcomes for the causal pathway(s) in component 3. Specifying these assumptions, testing or validating them, will provide a more nuanced understanding of the problem – and lead to learning. This learning can then be reflected by adapting the theory of change, and the project – and contribute to component 4. See STAP’s guidance on theory of change, and enabling elements listed below. (By the way, STAP applauds the useful stakeholder segmentation under Component 4, p.24.)

9. Consider expanding on the ‘alliance with the private sector’ detailing the development of green value chains through component 3.

Using simple narratives to ensure durability of GEF investments: <https://stapgef.org/resources/policy-briefs/using-simple-narratives-ensure-durability-gef-investments>

Framing policy coherence for the GEF: <https://stapgef.org/resources/policy-briefs/framing-policy-coherence-gef>

Achieving transformation through GEF investments: <https://stapgef.org/resources/advisory-documents/achieving-transformation-through-gef-investments>

Theory of change primer: <https://stapgef.org/resources/advisory-documents/theory-change-primer>

Enabling elements of good project design: <https://stapgef.org/resources/advisory-documents/enabling-elements-good-project-design-synthesis-stap-guidance-gef>

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.)