

STAP SCREENING TEMPLATE

GEF ID	11784
Project title	Conservation of Biodiversity, its Sustainable Use, Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits in India (CONSERVE)
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STAP Panel Member	Sandy Andelman
STAP Secretariat	Guadalupe Duron

1. Summary of STAP's views of the project

STAP acknowledges the GBFF project for India, "Conservation of Biodiversity, its Sustainable Use, Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits in India (CONSERVE)".

This is an important project that aims to support the implementation of India's updated NBSAP (2024-2030) by improving biodiversity governance through inclusive spatial planning in national and state agencies; enhancing Tribal and local community-led biodiversity conservation through a participatory and inclusive approach to identification and implementation of Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMS); providing innovative finance tools to support implementation of the NBSAP; and supporting monitoring, evaluation and adaptive management. STAP recognizes the value of these activities.

However, STAP recommends starting by applying a systems analysis to understand the interactions among the multiple drivers briefly outlined in the project document. This step would help strengthen the project's logic and structure, as well as its ambition to innovate and scale UNDP's and the World Bank's initiatives, including the World Bank's ELEMENT project, on which this project is substantially based. This systems analysis should then be incorporated into the Theory of Change; thereby, strengthening it substantially. Additionally, it will be important to include a more detailed consideration of climate change and its interaction with other drivers. STAP notes that the World Bank's Climate & Disaster Risk Screening (Annex 23) was completed, detailing climate information and trends. Nonetheless, this information does not appear to form part of the project design, as would be expected.

Below, STAP provides further details on its review and recommendations to help strengthen the project.

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 project objective, as stated in the Theory of Change (TOC) is important and ambitious, i.e., "to enhance NBSAP implementation in India through integrated spatial planning, a robust monitoring system and sustainable finance to advance transformative biodiversity conservation outcomes and effective ecosystem management".

The project has four components: (1) Strengthening biodiversity governance for improved ecosystem management; (2) Advancing tools for strengthening community-level biodiversity conservation; (3) Enhancing

innovative financing instruments for supporting NBSAP implementation; (4) Monitoring, evaluation and adaptive management. These components derive directly from priorities identified in India's updated NBSAP (2024-2030). In general, the project rationale is sound. However, parts of the TOC could be clarified and strengthened. For example, high human population density is not included as an underlying driver of biodiversity loss, despite recognition by scientists of the challenges it presents for biodiversity conservation in India (e.g., [Sengupta et al. 2023](#)). A systems analysis is needed to describe in greater detail the connections between drivers influencing the targeted systems and the links between global and local trends, such as climate change, market fluctuations, and population density and growth. STAP also acknowledges that the project aims to build on and scale the impact of several UNDP and World Bank initiatives, including the World Bank's ELEMENT project in India. Scaling should therefore feature more prominently in the theory of change.

The project focuses on three states in India: Nagaland, Tripura and Uttarakhand. The project rationale provides an overview of the biodiversity in the country, and to some extent, in these states. The proponents state that a national multi-criteria screening process was undertaken across 28 Indian states, combining ecological, socio-economic, and institutional parameters, to identify those states with the highest potential for biodiversity conservation, restoration and community-led management. While the individual criteria used make sense, and the three states have significant biodiversity, it is impossible to evaluate the credibility of the screening process, because the methods (including weighting given to different factors) and data sources are not described. The details of the scores are only provided for the three states selected. The other 25 states are given one single, composite "indicative range" score for each criterion, which is always stated as moderate to low, whereas the three selected states are almost always indicated as high or very high.

Maps of each state are included, indicating Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs), forest cover, existing protected areas and community conservation areas, as well as the target landscapes for conservation interventions (e.g., OECMs or restoration). Although the project states that priority biodiversity landscapes will be identified through participatory mapping and ecological assessments, both the maps and the narrative indicate that the target landscapes have already been identified. Reviewing the maps, there appears to be limited overlap of the target landscapes with KBAs, which is concerning. If the landscapes have already been selected, please provide the criteria and analysis that led to their selection. If they have not been selected, then the names of the specific landscapes should be removed and the landscapes should be selected based on the state- and national-level spatial planning.

The proponents apply a simple future narrative approach to explore what barriers limit NBSAP implementation and what project response options would be robust across all futures. However, this is done through a national lens. Similar narratives for each of the three states, reflecting each local context, is also necessary for the project to plan for uncertainty, such as impacts from the projected climate challenges and risks described in Annex 23. Further guidance on developing narratives is provided below.

3. Specific points to be addressed, and suggestions

STAP recommends the following points be addressed:

1. To strengthen the problem analysis, provide a more detailed analysis of (a) the specific components of biodiversity the project will target in state/landscape; (b) the local drivers of biodiversity loss; and (c) the interactions between the identified drivers of biodiversity loss, including climate change, and other trends identified in the project rationale, such as invasive alien species, population change, and market fluctuations. As part of the systems analysis, describe the social characteristics of the communities targeted by the project in each state. This information will help define the social systems, including norms, values, and power dynamics, as well as gender dimensions, that are essential for designing the project components and empowering local communities to make management decisions.

Essentially what is needed is a systems analysis and theory of change for each of the three states (in addition to the existing TOC which has a national focus). A description of the socio-cultural context of each targeted system is also necessary, given its importance in achieving the proposed outcomes, as indicated above. STAP recommends conducting a systems analysis and describing narratives, as outlined in [STAP's future narrative advisory document](#), for each state or landscape. The results of this analysis should then be reflected in the local theory of change, including in the relevant components. Refer to section 2.4 in the future narratives document for a summary on how to apply the narratives in the project design to plan for uncertainty.

2. The treatment of climate change seems superficial and should be strengthened. The TOC includes climate change as a driver of biodiversity loss, but there do not appear to be any logical intervention chains that will lead to improved outcomes. The proponents state “the project explicitly incorporates climate resilience into its design by embedding climate vulnerability overlays in the national and state biodiversity spatial plans (Outputs 1.1 and 1.2), ensuring restoration and OECM interventions are prioritized in key ecological zones.” Simply providing map overlays of climate vulnerability will not be sufficient to ensure restoration and conservation management interventions in OECMs will be robust to climate change. The spatial plan should include maps of climate hazards, including their extent and severity, and consider impacts on both nature and people. Further, in the section of the risk table for climate change, the examples of climate variability provided are: Droughts, landslides, and forest fires, however, while these may result from changes in climate variability, they are not in and of themselves examples of climate variability.
3. Without more detailed analyses of climate change, the project risks pursuing interventions that do not effectively account for system changes and uncertainties. STAP notes that a climate and disaster risk screening analysis has been done using the World Bank’s methods (Annex 23). However, as detailed above, the results from this analysis do not appear to have been used to design the project. Therefore, STAP urges the project team to design the activities based on the results of the analysis, to ensure as much as possible that the project interventions will be robust to climate change.
4. The social dimensions of climate change also should be considered. This includes considering beneficiaries’ vulnerabilities to climate change in the project design, clarifying how climate change will affect the beneficiaries’ abilities to conserve biodiversity, and how it could exacerbate social and economic inequalities for Tribal Peoples and local communities. In this context, the project has the potential to provide climate adaptation benefits. STAP’s paper, “[Delivering climate change adaptation benefits in GEF trust fund projects](#),” offers recommendations on designing for adaptation benefits that could be useful to the project team.
5. The spatial plans, especially at the landscape-scale, should include spatial data layers for invasive species, since these are included in the TOC as an underlying driver of biodiversity loss. The project design document should include a list of the all of the spatial data layers that will be included in the spatial plans.
6. The theory of change (TOC) should be clarified and strengthened to better support the project. In addition to adding human population density, to the drivers of biodiversity loss, weak legal frameworks also should be included as a driver of biodiversity loss. India has a history of weak protected area policy as evidenced by downgrading, downsizing and degazetting protected areas (PADDD) ([Sengupta et al. 2023](#)). [Kroner et al. 2019](#) identified at least 20 PADDD cases in India related to supporting infrastructure, mining and industrialization, which is having detrimental consequences for biodiversity. It is important, not only to create new OECMs, but also to ensure the existing protected area (PA) legal framework will ensure the PA estate is durable and robust.

With respect to OECMs, while the Government of India supports the creation of OECMs through its [Criteria and Guidelines for Identifying Other Effective Area Based Conservation Measures \(OECMs\) in](#)

[India](#), however, there are still some ambiguities in interpreting the meaning and scope of OECM that require clarification. STAP recommends defining clearly these two issues in the project document. Also a mechanism for monitoring and reporting on the effectiveness of OECMs is needed. In this regard, it is recommended that [governing bodies/organizations] establish and implement **transparent legal frameworks** to regulate the management of these areas and ensure equitable benefit sharing.

7. Also, in the context of strengthening the TOC, the complete logic going from drivers to outcomes, short-term results to long-term impacts, is not always clear. For example, for Outcome 1.1, what are all of the steps that need to happen, in which order, to move from spatial planning to having biodiversity management integrated into state and national government planning frameworks. STAP recommends separating components from outcomes and mapping impact pathways (backwards) from long-term impacts to outcomes, outputs, and components, while also identifying barriers and assumptions specific to each pathway that require testing or validation during project implementation. Refer to [STAP's theory of change primer](#) for further guidance on developing a theory of change figure and articulating its logic. Both steps would significantly strengthen the project's structure, which currently appears weak.
8. When developing the impact pathways, STAP also recommends identifying challenges to the project logic. This includes addressing the contextual risks which should not be listed in the risk table, for example, the risk that communities' exposure to climate hazards could increase. Residual risks that persist despite good project design should be added to the risk table, monitored, and the project adapted as needed. STAP recommends embedding innovation risk in the theory of change and project design, including the financial, institutional, and policy innovations described in components 1, 2 and 3. In fact, to achieve the innovation and transformative objectives, as well as the scaling of spatial planning platforms and policies, STAP urges, therefore, for the project team to strengthen the project logic to account for innovation. Refer to STAP's advisory note on "[Clarifying risks in GEF projects, with a focus on innovation risks](#)", which includes worked examples of financial, institutional and policy risks for the risk table.
9. STAP makes the following recommendations specific to the components:
 - a. Component 1: The project aims to enhance policy coherence, in part through spatial planning. For biodiversity inclusive spatial planning to be effective, this component appropriately deals to a large extent with coherence across government sectors. In this regard, STAP recommends defining explicit policy coherence objectives that focus on durable biodiversity benefits. The activities supporting this objective would focus on aligning subnational and national and regional policies so they do not conflict, as well as other measures that avoid misalignment or could undermine biodiversity conservation. Policy coherence is broadly mentioned throughout this component (e.g. activity 1.1.1.7), but more explicit objectives and activities, especially those aimed at aligning different sectors (e.g., in government ministries) aimed at policy coherence are warranted. See STAP's policy coherence advisory document: <https://www.stapgef.org/resources/advisory-documents/policy-coherence-gef>.
 - b. Component 4: STAP suggests connecting this component to the theory of change. This means focusing more on managing knowledge and learning by monitoring assumptions and challenges to the project logic (theory of change), as well as the numerous risks linked to innovation, which characterize components 1 to 3. Acting on this recommendation will shift this component away from merely describing standard GBFF/GEF project monitoring.
10. General comment: provide references to support statements. For example, it would be valuable to cite the BIOFIN methodology referenced in component 3 of the project document.

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.)